



HOW NOT TO SUMMON — A — DEMON LORD

VOLUME
5

Yukiya Murasaki
Illust. Takahiro Tsurusaki

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LORD

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"W...
WELCOME
BACK...MY
MASTER..."

Her shoulders trembled
and her eyes widened in
shock with beautiful,
transparent tears rolling
down her handsome
cheeks.



Their cheeks were flushed with color and the look in their eyes gradually took on a glossy, moist sheen.

As Diablo looked at them, he found himself overwhelmed by a peculiar sensation.



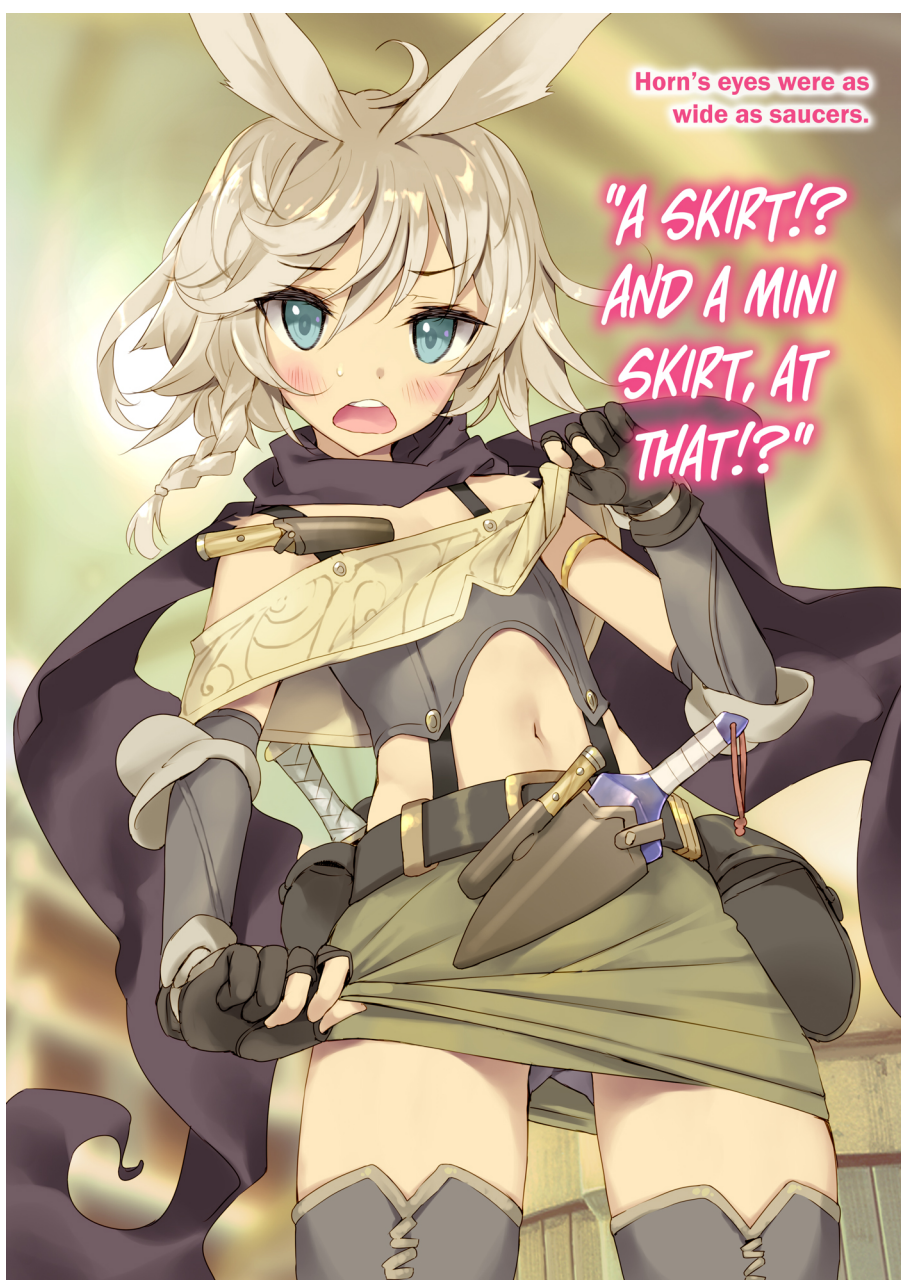
Beads of sweat rolled down the girls' bodies, the droplets dripping off their smooth, fair skins.

Their bodies heaved as they breathed in heavy, labored sighs.



Horn's eyes were as
wide as saucers.

"A SKIRT!?
AND A MINI
SKIRT, AT
THAT!?"



c o n t e n t s



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The story so far—

In the MMORPG Cross Reverie, Takuma Sakamoto was overwhelmingly powerful, and was able to role play so well that his performances were more boss-like than the actual bosses of the game. For this reason, he came to be known as the “Demon Lord.”

By defeating the 《Demon Lord of the Mind, Enkvaros》 faster than anyone else, he obtained the super rare item, the 《Demon Lord’s Ring》. It was one of the ultimate pieces of equipment in the game, able to reflect all types of magic.

Then, one day, Takuma found himself summoned to a world that looked exactly like Cross Reverie! Having performed the ritual magic at the same time, the Pantherian, Rem, and the Elf, Shera, fought over which one of them was his Summoner:

“...I am the one who summoned him. Your magic was a failure.”

“You’re wrong! He’s mine!”

But thanks to the Demon Lord’s Ring he wore, the magic was reflected, so the 《Enslavement Collar》 meant for him had clamped onto the two girls instead!

Faced with Rem and Shera arguing, Takuma was at a loss of what to do. While he may have been a superior player back in the game, he couldn’t talk with other people if his life depended on it. After struggling over what to say, the words that came out of his mouth were from the Demon Lord role play he had used in the game:

“Cease your pointless squabbling. You are in the presence of Diablo.”

The three of them have since made the town of Faltra their home base. As it turned out, Rem held a great secret: Within her body was sealed the soul of the 《Demon Lord Krebskulm》. Trembling with fear deep down, Diablo’s Demon Lord role playing drove him to promise he would find a solution to her plight.

A Fallen named Edelgard then led an army of one hundred of her brethren. At the same time, a powerful Fallen, Gregore, appeared in the middle of Faltra. Showing off his true power, Diablo completely routed Edelgard and her army. Using the 《Return》 spell, he made his way back to Faltra instantaneously, and in an overwhelming display of magic, Diablo destroyed Gregore. Thanks to his efforts, he managed to save Rem and many others in the city.

Diablo later found himself the recipient of a quest from the governor of Faltra, Galford. Prince Keera of the Elven Kingdom of

Greenwood had demanded Shera be returned to him, threatening open war with Faltra against the country of Elves should compliance fail. The details of Galford's quest were simply to find a way to avoid the war. The bespectacled, straight-and-narrow Imperial Knight Alicia was assigned to the group as an observer to watch over their actions.

Yet Shera still ended up being taken away from Diablo. Despite the numerous obstacles in his way, however, Diablo was successful in rescuing Shera.

After her rescue, the group set off to resurrect the Demon Lord Krebskulm trapped inside Rem. But in the process, Krebskulm had lost a portion of her memories as a Demon Lord, being reduced to a biscuit-loving young girl, who was then nicknamed "Klem."

Peaceful days passed by...

Suddenly, Alicia betrayed the group! Now awakened as a true Demon Lord, Klem went into a destructive frenzy. But thanks to one of Diablo's ultimate spells and the sound of Rem and Shera's voices, Klem was subdued and reverted to her biscuit-loving form. To ensure Klem would never go berserk again, Diablo bound her with the same enslavement magic afflicted upon Shera and Rem.

Through a string of coincidences, or perhaps God's own guidance, Diablo found himself rescuing Lumachina, a holy woman, from the Paladin Gewalt. Being a High Priest, Lumachina was the highest ranking member of the Church. However, due to her attempts at ridding the Church of corruption and avarice, she was nearly assassinated. Still seeking to reform the corrupt Church, Lumachina sought the help of the Paladin Captain Batutta, setting out to meet him in Zircon Tower.

Located in the perilous expanse of the former Demon Lord's Domain, Diablo's group of Adventurers accompanied her as bodyguards. After a long journey, they arrived at their destination, and were greeted by Batutta.

However—

Batutta had been culminating the spread of a cursed illness known as Death Knell disease, and extorted donations in exchange for treatment.

Diablo fought hard, defeating Batutta and toppling his underground altar. But all of a sudden, Lumachina collapsed, the mark of the Death Knell disease having appeared on her body.

Diablo declared: "We're going to a certain dungeon, a place we're sure to find what you need!"

Prologue

Her pale fingers gently flicked away the dull white steam. Ripples spread across the liquid, reaching her body that was soaked in the bathtub. The water splashed over her plump chest.

“Ahhh...” The young woman rested her head against the marble, spreading out her crimson hair.

She was the governor of Zircon Tower, Fanis Laminitus.

Near the peak of the tower was this splendid bathroom, the likes of which couldn't be found even within the Imperial Capital. A luxurious facility of unmatched extravagance, it was here she would go to restore her spirits, so she may persist in her governmental duties the following day.

Laminitus's thoughts drifted to the Sorcerer she had met in town this afternoon...

“What do you plan to do after finding this Sorcerer?”

“If We can use them, then We will make them into Our subordinate, of course! If they won't listen, however, then We will teach them the difference between our powers by force!”

“Aren't you a nasty piece of work.”

To call the ruler of this land a “nasty piece of work”...

“Heh... An interesting man, that one.”

The magic he used to repel the 《Sand Whale》 charging at the town was stronger than anything she'd ever laid eyes on. One would be hard-pressed to find an Elemental Sorcerer of that caliber, let alone as a part of the Mage's Association. He was undoubtedly blessed with extraordinary talent.

But there was something young and boyish in his eyes. His selflessness, unbecoming of someone of his ability, was at odds with his arrogant attitude.

Laminitus stroked her well-rounded breasts. Seeing her do so, that man would appear rather embarrassed, wouldn't he?

“Walking around with those slave girls by his side... Could it be he's never known a woman?”

Come to think of it, she'd forgotten to ask for his name. She should have someone look into that. She was the type to set things into action as soon as they came to mind, so, while still submerged in

the tub, she called out.

“Come!”

Usually, a steward waiting outside would reply to her instantly...

But there was no response.

An odd sense of unease filling her heart, Laminitus rose from the tub. Water dripped from her toned body and brilliant scarlet hair.

She strained her lulled senses. Exposing her body to the air, she felt something she failed to notice until now.

—*What is this? This sticky presence in the air...*

Laminitus reached out her hand. A muddy, sloshing presence was approaching her with startling speed.

Swiftly grasping her Revolver-type Magi Gun, she turned around

—



A jet-black presence stood over the bath water's surface.

Not even bothering to confirm its identity, Laminitus pulled the trigger, the gunshot echoing across the room. The Magi Gun's bullet had undoubtedly hit its target, but the figure hadn't changed its expression at all.

It was a man, appearing to be in his twenties, and could be described as quite a looker. His skin was pearly white, with a slender jawline, slit-like eyes, and a smooth, narrow nose. He sported a tuxedo, as if he was preparing to attend an evening party.

All in all, his attire was somewhat old-school.

With just his appearance, one could mistake him for a youth who would mingle easily with high-society.

But he was standing on the water's surface, and on his back was a pair of bat-like wings. Even though a bullet was lodged in his left breast, no blood seeped from the wound.

He's clearly not human...

Coming to that realization, Laminitus tried to steady her breath. She was nude, but wasn't the type to feel shamed for it, and didn't currently have the leisure for it either.

"You're Fallen, aren't you?"

"Eheheh... Indeed I am, lovely miss."

"Shut your trap. We are far beyond an age where the likes of you could call Us 'miss.' We were under the assumption a Fallen could never invade this tower."

"Oh, it was quite simple, really. Unlike the races, I'm capable of flight."

"The scouts and guards should have noticed you in that case."

"Well, it appears they were a touch tired, you see, so I went ahead and put them to sleep... An eternal slumber, shall we say?"

"You bastard!"

Laminitus fired a second time. The bullet hit him dead on, but again didn't seem to have any effect.

—Is he immortal!?

She stifled the unease in her heart. But try as she might to remain calm, her nakedness concerned her. All she had in her hand was the Magi Gun she carried for self-defense, after all. She couldn't so much as hope to bluff her way out of this.

The Fallen youth smiled wryly. "That little toy wouldn't even scratch me. But please, do compose yourself. I only came tonight to talk."

"Hmph... A Fallen 'only' wants to talk..."

Fallen butchered the Races on sight. There was no discussing or negotiating with them.

Or at least, that's how it should have been...

Still floating in the air, he changed his posture as if he was sitting down, crossing his long, slender legs.

"It would be appropriate to begin with introductions, no? I am known as Varakness."

"Can't say We've ever had the pleasure of a Fallen introducing themselves to Us. Don't tell Us you're expecting Us to give you Our name in return."

"It's only natural. It was I who came to you, after all."

"And just what for?"

Varakness clapped his hands, as if applauding her.

"Let me begin by expressing my admiration for you. You've done quite well shooting down that great whale. I was honestly astonished to find one among the races who had the power to fell such a beast."

Laminitus's eyes widened in shock. "So you were the one that loosed the Sand Whale on Our city?"

"An astute conclusion. There are those under my command capable of manipulating magical beasts; however, controlling the great whale was an arduous task. I never imagined you would repel it."

"We take it the runaway sand ship was unrelated?"

"Let's just say we...put it to good use."

To manipulate a magical beast of that size—truly, a formidable foe. Laminitus couldn't afford to let him shake her confident façade here.

"So you tried to use a massive magical beast to destroy Zircon Tower. We see you Fallen are afraid of attacking Our city directly. That's the best news We've heard in a while."

"No no, make no mistake." Varakness shook his head with a wry smile. "That was my attempt at mercy."

"Color Us surprised. Never thought We would hear a Fallen tell a joke."

"I thought you would find an instantaneous, painless death by the whale's maw preferable to being slowly butchered by my armies."

He said something she couldn't easily ignore.

"Armies?"

"Why, yes, I am the commander-in-chief of the Demon Lord's armies."

A shiver ran down Laminitus' spine, her hairs standing on end.

"It can't be..."

With the former Demon Lord's disappearance, the Demon Lord's army should have been wiped out. Hearing those words come from the lips of a Fallen must have meant it was reorganized somehow.

"I'm sure that you've already surmised this by now...but His

Majesty the Demon Lord has been resurrected.”

“What!?”

—*The races have fought for so long to prevent the Demon Lord’s revival, but if what he’s saying is true, then he’s already been resurrected...*

It’s been told that, should the Demon Lord return, the Fallen and magical beasts would rise in power. And this Fallen, Varakness, already has great magical power, capable of taking Laminitus’s bullet without so much as flinching. It may well be that he received power from the resurrected Demon Lord.

Laminitus recalled hearing rumors of the Demon Lord’s sigil appearing over the skies of Faltra. Apparently that was more than just nonsense now.

Laminitus nodded. “Now you’ve come to announce the Demon Lord’s return?”

“He has already awakened, yes. But I wouldn’t come just for the sake of informing you of that.”

“Then spit it out, already. We are not much for patience.”

“Ah, as you wish. Then I shall put this as bluntly as possible: Surrender.”

An unexpected suggestion; she never thought a Fallen would try to negotiate.

“Ha! A Fallen, demanding the races surrender?” Laminitus shrugged. “What do you intend to do if We agree, rule over a town of humans? That’d be a spectacle. Imagine the Demon Lord, dabbling in politics. What a kicker.”

“Eheheh... His Majesty’s rule will be a merciful, fair one.”

“Oh, will it, now?”

“Yes; as a matter of fact, we will have every single one of the races commit suicide. A far more merciful end than being devoured alive by our magical beasts, no?”

Disappointment and excitement mixed within Laminitus’s heart. In the end, there really was no coexisting with the Fallen.

The realization that there truly was no reasoning with them filled her with disappointment. But on the other hand, she felt exaltation, an excitement for the battle to come.

A fighting spirit filled her body and soul, burning with vigor.

“In our language, we interpret the Fallen as living beings who stand with the demons. Since you can understand our language, let Us teach you what we say whenever something like this happens—”

“It seems you have an answer. Just what, oh what, will it be?”

“Piss off.”

Varakness stiffened, his wry smile still on his lips; but his peaceful

expression gradually crumbled. His lips parted, revealing a mouth full of fangs.

“Hahahaha! Then I shall begin our massacre by devouring you!”

“Don’t look down on Us, you insignificant small-fry! 《Flare Bullet》!”

She reinforced the magical energy laced in her Magi Gun’s bullets with further magical energy, and fired the three remaining shots in her revolver.

Flames burst out in a blaze, and Varakness was covered in black smoke.

Laminitus jumped out of the bath. Her powerful equipment was in the adjacent room. If she could just get to that—

Something burst from the black smoke, pushing her away and ramming her against the wall.

“Kuha...!”

—*What just happened!?*

The black smoke cleared, revealing Varakness’s fist that had just rammed into her. His arm stretched unnaturally, extending like an elephant’s trunk. It returned to its normal length with a sickening slithering sound.

“Eheheh... Magically reinforced bullets, is it? Quite an effective idea. It certainly packed a punch, and I’m being very honest here, you know?”

His tuxedo was burning; was it only his clothes that were on fire, or did she actually inflict damage to him?

“Oh, how sad for you...but I am far too strong. I’ve no means of gauging my strength accurately, but if I were to measure it by your standards...I believe I would most certainly be level 160.”

“What!? That’s a lie!”

To properly manage quests, there was need for a system that would scale and measure an Adventurer’s strength, that system of measurement being levels. But the highest level one could become was 100 at best.

In the past, the races’ greatest hero, Alan, once claimed his level was 150. It was then commonly believed that the upper level limit for the races was 150. This meant this Fallen was stronger than anyone among the races.

As infuriating as it was to admit, she had no way of fighting back as she currently was.

Laminitus placed her left hand against the wall, supporting herself. Keeping herself upright was the most she could do right now.

The pain in her seemingly dislocated shoulder sapped away all her strength. Not to mention she had dropped her Magi Gun, though it didn’t really matter since it was out of bullets, anyway.

Varakness closed in on her.

"I've changed my mind about you. You're stronger than I anticipated. I find strong women to be most...alluring."

"What did you just say?"

Varakness's fingers, entirely human in appearance, ran across Laminitus's skin, tracing the outlines of her breasts. His demonic claws tweaked the tips of her chest, grabbing them in a pinch.

A shock ran down Laminitus's spine.

"Ugh...!"

A droplet of blood oozed from where the claw touched her. Varakness's lips distorted into a smirk.

"Heh heh heh... All it takes is a small touch, and you tear apart. To think someone so short-lived, so fragile, would be strong enough to injure me. I find women like you oh so, oh so attractive."

"You make Us sick."

"That strong will of yours only whets my appetite more. You stand strong despite knowing all I have to do to end your life is plunge my fist into that soft bosom of yours."

"Try it, then. Even if you crush Our heart, We'll just chew out your windpipe."

"Fanis Laminitus... I shan't kill you. Instead, I will induct you into my harem."

Varakness's large hands touched Laminitus's neck and grabbed her chin, pushing her against the wall once more. She tried to use her still-functional left hand to punch his face, but he easily grabbed her wrist.

This was an opponent capable of shrugging off a Magi Gun's bullet. She couldn't hope to phase him with her bare hands.

Varakness's face slowly drew closer to hers—

"Lady Laminitus!"

A voice cried out from their side. At that moment, a bullet charged with magic energy fired into the room, causing a small explosion.

"To stand in the way of an act of love... So boorish," Varakness sneered scornfully.

One of Laminitus's subordinate knights charged into the room, firing a large Magi Gun in rapid succession.

"Get away from Lady Laminitus, you foul Fallen!"

"Ah, impressive. The more obstacles standing in its way, the more passionate love becomes. I would gladly face you here and now, but it simply wouldn't do to have my new beloved caught in the crossfire. I suppose I shall withdraw for the night."

Varakness levitated into the air with a composed expression,

pelted with magic bullets all the while.

Released from his hands, Laminitus finally breathed in relief.

“Ugh... Running away, are you?”

“Sparing you would be more apt. I will come for you on the night of the next full moon. Do choose your bridal dress carefully, Fanis.”

“Don’t you dare call Us by Our name, you clown!”

“Ahahaha... Next time, I will claim you entirely, both in body and spirit,” Varakness said, licking red droplets from the claw that dug into the tip of Laminitus’s chest.

“Argh...” She reflexively covered her chest with one hand.

Varakness’s laughter resounded through the room. He brandished one arm; the wall of the tower, normally strong enough to withstand even cannon fire, burst apart, revealing a hole outside.

Laminitus’s eyes widened. Not only was he impervious to Magi Gun fire, he could shatter the tower’s walls with a wave of his arm?

“A monster...”

The black-clad Fallen soared outside the tower through the hole he just created. Spreading his bat-like wings, he disappeared into the starless sky.

“Are you unharmed!?” The knight rushed to Laminitus.

“Of course. Who do you take Us for?”

Her right arm still wouldn’t move, though. However far from the truth it was, Laminitus still claimed she was fine. Even if she wasn’t properly equipped for the encounter, this defeat was far too one-sided.

Her fists trembled with rage.

The knight knelt before her. “My apologies! To think we would allow the enemy to reach so far...”

“What of the guards?”

“A few of them are still alive, but...”

—*Varakness wasn’t lying, then. The majority of them were killed.*

Servants filed into the room, carrying a change of clothes and Laminitus’s equipment. It wasn’t uncommon for aristocrats to let servants help them with changing out of and putting on clothes. Laminitus was used to having her body seen by others. But unlike the other workers, the knights weren’t used to seeing Laminitus’s naked body.

The knight that came to her rescue turned his gaze away, blushing furiously. He was visibly embarrassed.

If she remembered correctly, his name was—

“Henric, was it?”

“Yes, Ma’am!”

“Well done, having come to Our aid.”

“Y-Yes! I’m glad nothing awful happened to you, Lady Laminitus!”

He bowed, hanging his head that was red all the way down to his

neck.

As the former Demon Lord's Domain was a harsh place to live in, most of Laminitus's subordinates were the crude, vulgar type. This man was rather naïve in comparison.

"Henric, gather all the commanding officers and heads of the Adventurer's and Mage's guilds. We have an urgent announcement to make. If anyone's asleep, wake them up."

"Understood!"

He rose to his feet and saluted, but since Laminitus was still halfway through getting changed, he seemed rather bothered as his eyes darted about, not knowing where to look.

Chapter 1: Going to a Dungeon

Diablo lowered the altar he levitated using his magic in the outskirts of Zircon Tower. It was some distance away from the city itself, so there was no one around. The area was almost entirely a desert, and the only things dotting the terrain were rocks of varying sizes.

The sun was slowly rising on the horizon...

It was just last night when Rem and Lumachina were captured by the Paladin Captain Batutta. Diablo stormed the underground hideout, defeated Batutta, and rescued the two.

But there was one problem...

"Please hang in there, Lumachina!" Rem cried out.

"Y-Yes... I'm... fine..." She answered with a voice that sounded anything but fine.

The girl crouched on top of the altar was the High Priest, Lumachina Weselia. She was clothed in a pure white priest's garb, but her clothes were disheveled, exposing her thighs where a blackish-purple mark surfaced on her skin.

The Death Knell disease.

Once nine marks appeared on the victim's body, they passed away. It wasn't a disease, but a curse.

While defending the church as a Paladin Captain, Batutta had also dabbled in his vices and used ritual magic to create this curse. Only a priest's miracle could remove it.

But Lumachina was the exception. She was blessed with the power to summon great miracles herself, but as if to compensate for that, all manners of miracles had no effect on her body. Be it the healing of wounds or treatment of diseases, or most importantly right now, the dispelling of curses...

If left unchecked, once the ninth mark would appear on her skin, Lumachina will die.

—I'll never let that happen.

Diablo swore in his heart. Lumachina just didn't deserve to die like this.

Because of her tremendous talent, she was worshiped by the Church. But she was also a proactive and sincere person who would pursue justice to the bitter end. Having learned of the church's corruption, she set out to do just that.

She had done the right thing.

As a result, the corrupt, selfish members of the church went after her life, and she was now afflicted by this terrible curse.

—Isn't that terrible!? The poor thing!

Diablo knew of one method that might save Lumachina from her plight. In Cross Reverie, there was an item capable of dispelling Death Knell disease, rewarded in a limited-time event. It was only for “an event where the townspeople who were cured from Death Knell disease come thank you” and had no use in battle.

But it should work on Lumachina here. A priest's prayer may not have any effect on her, but Diablo had previously confirmed items and potions did.

The item in question was called the 《White Ox Statue》, and was tucked away in his Storage. According to the game's setting, his storage should be at the bottom of the dungeon where he built his personal area, in a chamber called 《The Treasure Vault》. According to the Grasswalker Adventurer Horn, Diablo's dungeon was near this town.

—I have to go for it.

He wanted to save Lumachina.

Horn raised his hand. He had rabbit ears and a rabbit's tail in the appearance of a young boy. Grasswalkers are a race that have the appearance of young children regardless of their actual age. A nimble race, they're adept at magic and espionage, but lacking when it comes to endurance and physical strength.

“Hey, Boss, why're you so dead set on going to the dungeon all of a sudden? I mean, I'm glad you want to go, but...”

“The item Lumachina needs should be in that dungeon.”

“Y-You mean that dungeon I recently discovered? I think I only mentioned that one...”

“Yes. Considering everything you have told me, I think that is the place.”

“Lord Diablo,” Lumachina opened her mouth to speak, “am I to understand that item can lift the curse of the Death Knell disease?” she asked him with an imploring, trusting look in her eyes.

He didn't know for sure if it was there, but based on what Horn told him, Diablo readily believed it was the dungeon he made in his personal area. In which case, the event item, White Ox Statue, should be there, and it should be able to dispel the curse.

It was all just a possibility; he couldn't quite say for certain.

He should probably tell them the circumstances...

—But lowering their confidence with uncertain information isn't what a Demon Lord would do! It isn't what a God would do!

“Believe in me. If you wish for it, I shall grant you a treasure capable of a true miracle!”

Lumachina prostrated before him, bowing her head to the ground.

“Yes, I believe in you, Lord Diablo! My faith in you will never waver in the slightest!”

Her faith in God was tremendous. Because of that, she was granted such amazing prowess over miracles.

—If there is a God out there, He shouldn't abandon a good girl like her. He should save her.

Diablo heaved a sigh internally. Lumachina was under the impression that Diablo was “God in disguise” because he had coincidentally appeared when she called out to God for help. But the truth was he was actually “a shut-in gamer pretending to be a Demon Lord”...

But if they were to leave her as is, Lumachina would die from the curse in a matter of days. Even if it was uncertain, they had no choice but to go to the dungeon.

And if they were heading out, they would need to prepare.

The long journey combined with the Death Knell disease were taking their toll on Lumachina. It would be best if she would wait for them at an inn.

“For the time being, let's go back to town and make preparations.”

Diablo had little to no experience operating in a group. It wasn't a suggestion to the others; he really said that to himself.

But Rem the Pantherian tilted her head pensively. “...I am not sure if that would be wise.”

Pantherians typically have red or ginger ears and tails, but Rem's were a rare black color. Her hair, ears, and tail were a sleek shade of ebony. And while that was probably unrelated, her body was somewhat lacking when it came to curves, and she was rather slender and lithe for a fourteen-year-old.

Diablo nodded at Rem, urging her to explain.

“Speak your mind. I permit it.”

“...The citizens of the town may be in a panic after that huge magical explosion. If we enter Zircon Tower, I doubt the merchants would be inclined to help us right now. We might even end up being questioned by the militia and military.”

“What a waste of time...”

“I do believe bringing Batutta's misdeeds to light is important, but considering Lumachina's condition, I think we should head straight for the dungeon. This is a major incident, and there's no saying how long they would detain crucial witnesses like us.”

Rem was wise. Her experience as an Adventurer was vast, and her

suggestions were for the most part sound. Her fears were also understandable.

“Agreed!” Shera raised her hand in the air enthusiastically. “Let’s save Lumachina as soon as possible!”

Shera L. Greenwood was an Elf, and an Elven princess, at that. She was currently running away from home, in search of her own freedom. With a mystical air to her and a curvy, gorgeous frame, it was as if one of the gods themselves had descended to support them. And yet, the moment she opened her mouth, it would become incredibly apparent how lacking she was in the “thinking” department.

—*Should we really head to the dungeon right away...?*

It would probably save them the most trouble. But Diablo felt like he should rest in town, too, if possible.

During his battle with the Paladin Captain Batutta, his HP was reduced to 1. Thanks to the effects of the 《Distorted Crown》 he had equipped, his health was gradually recovering even now, but that was taking far too long. If he were to use all the HP Potions he had on him, it wouldn’t even recover half of his total health.

With the materials he acquired from Faltra, the most he could make were “R” rarity potions. He would need a potion made from “SSR” materials to fully heal his HP. Just with the equipment he currently had on him, even a week might not be enough to fully recover.

It was astounding he was even alive after having his heart pierced, but that was magic for you.

His gamer reflexes urged him to prioritize recovering.

Rushing to continue the story without recovering one’s health, and then losing after running into a powerful opponent, was a very common occurrence in games. Being prepared for a situation where the game urged you to hurry and continue to the next part of the story was fundamental.

He was worried about Lumachina, but it would take time until the ninth mark appeared. Surely they had a day or two to spare.

Come to think of it, Lumachina could use healing miracles, and probably of the highest rank in the whole Kingdom of Lyferia.

—*No, no, no.*

Diablo shook his head in denial. The 《Demon Lord’s Ring》 he had equipped would reflect a healing miracle. He could remove the ring and have her heal him, but...Rem and Shera were under the impression his magic reflection was an ability inherent to his Demon Lord nature. If he were to tell them it was all the ring’s effect, he

would look so lame.

Besides, asking a priest for healing isn't something a Demon Lord would do, let alone a God.

As a pro gamer that prioritized efficiency, it would make perfect sense to ask her for help. But his Demon Lord role play meant he could never reveal his true self to them. If he did, he wouldn't be able to talk to them without stuttering. It would be like walking through a blizzard completely naked.

—*Yeah, no way.*

Putting that aside, Rem's concerns were valid. Going back to town would probably be more trouble than it was worth. Fanis Laminitus, Zircon Tower's governor, seemed particularly hard to reason with, and in this case...

"Diablo, look!" Rem pointed to the horizon.

Looking up, he could see small black dots gradually approaching them from afar. Something was coming their way, kicking up clouds of dust as it drew near them.

"What is that?"

"...It seems they are the military's sand ships."

A Pantherian's eyesight was keen. Even from a distance, Rem could make out the emblem on the sand ships' sails.

Hearing the word "military," Shera's and Horn's expressions stiffened with fear.

Rem continued her report: "One of the ships is especially large, and has an emblem of two guns crossed over each other... Maybe the governor's craft? I recall seeing the same emblem on her armor."

"Hmph, that fool has too much time on her hands," Diablo said, displaying haughtiness worthy of a Demon Lord.

Under the surface, he was far from composed. Fighting a high-level Magi Gunner with less than a tenth of his HP was a bad idea. And he was low on MP, too...

If he was up against another Sorcerer, his Demon Lord's Ring's magic reflection would keep him safe; but it had no effect on Magi Gun bullets.

That said, running away with his tail between his legs would be totally lame. He had to find a way to avoid combat while maintaining his dignity as a Demon Lord!

Lumachina rose to her feet, still breathing heavily. "It seems Lady Laminitus is approaching... Would you mind if I explain our circumstances to her?"

"I just hope she's willing to accept our explanation..." Rem said nervously.

“I am sure if we explain our situation honestly, we can come to an understanding with her.”

Lumachina wasn't a fool, but had a tendency to believe in others too much. They could explain themselves as earnestly as possible, but most odds were leaning toward a reply of bullets laced with magic flying their way.

That was just how dangerous the person they were going up against was.

†

As they were considering their options, Zircon Tower's military had surrounded them with their fleet of sand ships. There were ten ships, with roughly 2,000 troops. And, as they expected, they could spot the governor, Laminitus, aboard the largest ship.

Behind her fluttered the 《Crimson Wings》, a cloak that granted its wearer the magical ability of flight, and she was clad in armor hemmed with gold. But there was one stark difference compared to the last time they saw her:

Her right hand was bound and suspended by bandages.

—*Is she injured? What happened to her?*

Laminitus looked down on them from aboard the ship's deck. “Our reports claim that you all came out from the depths of the earth. The people seem to believe you're a Demon Lord. Answer immediately and honestly: *Are you the Demon Lord?*”

Her question cut straight to the chase.

Diablo smiled scornfully; the answer to that question was obvious.

But if he had the stomach and wit to think of a better retort, he wouldn't be known for his communication apprehension. He wouldn't be a reclusive reject addicted to video games, leading a NEET lifestyle, and introverted to the point that even in the game he would insist on playing solo.

And most important of all, a Demon Lord would never respond to that question with “Demon Lord? Never heard of him!” It would be the lamest thing ever!

“I am Diablo, a Demon Lord from another world! And let it be known I take orders from no one!”

He answered confidently, but on the inside he was panicking.

—*Ohhh, crap! I did not just say that!*

The sand ships' soldiers stirred restlessly. Diablo could hear the sound of swords being unsheathed.

“W-Was that wise, Diablo?” Rem looked up to him anxiously. “If you say that, they might—”

—*So it was a bad idea!*

Shera tilted her head quizzically. “Does the military slay Demon Lords from other worlds, too?”

—*“Slay”!?*

“Fuahahahaha!” Diablo laughed loudly, trying to mask his own anxiety. “I shall not run or hide! Anyone wishing to die may step before me! I shall etch the true meaning of horror into their bones!”

“Oh no...” Horn was shivering in terror.

Diablo was shivering in terror, too, in his mind.

Laminitus raised her left hand high into the air. “Heh... Quite the bravado you have there. As you desire, We shall bring you to ruin! Return to your eternal slumber, Demon Lord! All hands, at the ready!”

The troops aboard the sand ships took aim with their Magi Guns.

Diablo was surprised. Magi Gunners were an advanced class of high level Archers. Only those who polished their skills in archery to the level of mastery and developed their capacity for magic could achieve this class. And there were this many of them here?

—*Come to think of it, Summoners are far more popular here than in the game. Maybe all the Archers have a reason to specialize in becoming Magi Gunners?*

If that many were to attack him at once at his current HP, there was a good chance they’d actually kill him. It all depended on their level, but...would he have to take them all out before they shot!?

“Please wait!”

Lumachina stepped forward. “I am the head of the church: the High Priest, Lumachina Weselia. Even though this man claims to be the Demon Lord, he is no enemy of the races, nor is he someone you should direct your animosity against!”

Laminitus glared at her. “Ha! So those swindlers’ boss is siding with a Demon Lord!?”

“Surely you recall how this esteemed gentleman pushed back the magical beast that threatened Zircon Tower. If he was truly a threat to the races, why would he save you?”

“The Sand Whale was controlled by the Fallen. Who would believe a measly Elemental Sorcerer could push it back in the first place!”

“Lord Diablo is a talented Sorcerer! He defended this town, saved me, and has fought every step of the way to protect others!”

“They why does he call himself a Demon Lord!?”

—*Because if I don’t, I can only speak in “Uhhh”s and “Hmm”s!*

If he could say that, he’d be able to worm his way out of this

problem, but whenever he tried to speak with his own words, his voice got stuck in his throat. Every time he considered saying the truth, the thought of the others scorning, mocking, and getting mad at him reared its ugly head...and he froze.

But if it was an act, no matter what negative reaction came his way, he could explain it away with, "I was role playing a Demon Lord, so it's not my fault."

He knew how awkward that was, but that's just who he was. Besides, he couldn't just say, "I was just pretending to be a Demon Lord, teehee~" after all this time.

It wasn't just Laminitus; imagining how the people who called themselves his companions would react made him stiffen in horror.

—Staying alive may be important, but the shame alone would kill me! Maybe not physically, but emotionally speaking I'd be totally dead!

Just the thought of it caused him to sweat profusely and shiver in terror. Everything went blurry.

Diablo pointed 《Tenma's Staff》 at the sand ship.

"Step aside, Lumachina. If these fools choose to stand in my way, I have no choice but to obliterate them."

"P-Please forgive them, my Lord! They, too, are righteous men and women working to defend the lands of man. Even if you can only see them as an obstacle to your lofty goals, please, spare their lives!"

Lumachina spread her arms, standing between them. This small girl was trying to stop this conflict from breaking out, all on her own.

—She's amazing...

He was genuinely impressed with her. Even now, with a curse that may take her life in a manner of days eating away at her, the desire to defend others still drove her to action.

If he was in a situation where his life was in the balance, he doubted he would even consider someone else's survival.

Diablo lowered Tenma's Staff.

"You little fool. Out of respect for you, I will pardon their insolence. But just this once."

"Thank you for your kindness!" Lumachina lowered her head deeply, then turned her gaze to Laminitus. "Lady Laminitus, would a Demon Lord save or even spare a life? Lord Diablo has saved mine on more than one occasion. And he has also proclaimed he would grant upon us an item that could cure this city of the Death Knell disease. While this esteemed gentleman may be a Demon Lord, I have no doubt in my heart he is a benevolent one!"

A benevolent Demon Lord...

Laminitus would likely never believe those words. Diablo could

only think of the moment when the order to attack would be issued.

Rem stepped forward, standing beside Lumachina.

“...Governor of Zircon Tower, please listen to what I have to say, as well. We were about to set out to a certain dungeon, and Diablo said he could lead us to where a treasure that can cure the Death Knell disease lies.”

Laminitus eyed Rem suspiciously before spitting out, “Nonsense —”

“So please! If we come back from the dungeon empty-handed, you may cast your judgment on Diablo then. Decide again, based on his actions, if he is a Demon Lord or not. Is that not fair!?”

“We cannot approve of that. We pass judgment on you first! If you have done nothing wrong, you will be free to go wherever you please. Assuming you’ve done nothing wrong!”

“...Please... Please wait. One of our companions is infected with Death Knell disease. We truly haven’t the time to spare.”

Laminitus’ eyes narrowed. “You are not lying, are you? Show Us proof.”

“Our proof is—”

Rem faltered. At that moment, Lumachina raised her voice.

“Your proof is right here.”

She raised the hem of her priest’s garb, revealing her thighs. A girl her age would probably be terribly distraught by revealing herself like this before such a large group of people... And yet she did. That was how earnest her desire to stop the fighting was.

Seeing the mark on Lumachina’s flesh, Laminitus heaved a sigh. “I see... We never thought even the High Priest would be infected.”

“I believe this is a trial the Lord has placed upon me. Perhaps this is all his way of spurring me to bring back the treasure, and save all those afflicted by the plague.”

Things were gradually becoming more serious.

—But what will we do if that dungeon is the wrong one, or doesn’t have the White Ox Statue?

The thought of that occurrence sent an ominous shiver down Diablo’s spine.

“We are no close-minded fool.” Laminitus nodded. “We understand your side in the matter. Indeed, time is not in your favor. As for the so-called Demon Lord... It is true; if We are to judge him, it would be merely to prosecute him based on his actions. There is truth to your words.”

Lumachina and Rem beamed up. On the other hand, Laminitus’s words were apparently too complicated for Shera to follow, who tilted her head in confusion. Horn also still appeared to be panicking.

But Diablo remained on his guard. He didn’t see Laminitus as the

type who would accept their request unconditionally.

Sure enough, she would go on to say one thing they couldn't accept—

“Very well. You may go and retrieve your treasure from the dungeon! We will accept it as proof of your innocence.”

“Thank you very much!” Rem said in gratitude, but Laminitus shook her head.

“Wait. We have no guarantee you will return.”

“What? But we would need to go through the dungeon to...”

Lumachina's confusion came from her lack of experience as an Adventurer. This was something they should have naturally considered.

Laminitus was a shrewd woman.

“We must take into consideration the possibility of there being another exit from the dungeon. You will leave one of your companions behind. We should... Yes, should you fail to return in seven days, they shall be beheaded. They will likewise be beheaded if you return empty-handed. If you are willing to leave them, We will believe in your words.”

Coming from that stubborn governor, this was actually quite the compromise.

—*But in the worst case scenario, the treasure might not be there...*

“Horn. Which way from here to the dungeon?” Diablo asked in a whisper.

“Huh...? I-It's north of town.”

“Good. When I give the signal, run.”

“S-Sure thing, Boss!”

Rem and Lumachina looked astonished.

Diablo prodded the ground with Tenma's Staff.

“《Earth Bounce》!”

It was the first time he used it in a desert, but... Just like in the game, the screen—the ground began quaking. The earth rumbled, making his field of vision shake and waver. Earth Bounce was an Earth elemental spell, after all.

The sand ships the troops were aboard began rocking, jolting up and down.

“W-Whoa, what is this!?” “I-It's shaking... The ship's shaking!”

“Who told you guys to move the ships!?” “The ground is moving!” “He did that with magic!? How is that...!?”

The sand ships began lurching forward, and the soldiers raised their voices in horror.

Living in Japan, Diablo was somewhat used to earthquakes, but

this wasn't the case for residents of this world.

Within a moment, Diablo felt his consciousness waver, as a desire to curl up in the sand and do nothing overwhelmed him.

He was out of MP. His body became sluggish, taking after his now lethargic mind.

But right now he had to save Lumachina. He couldn't afford to be caught by the governor now.

Diablo broke into a run. "Stay close to me! This tremor is the work of my magic!"

Earth Bounce's effective radius was thirty meters around the caster. Beyond that, it had no effect. But the ground's shaking made it hard to walk and leave said area.

Following his instructions, Rem, Shera, Lumachina, and Horn all tagged behind him. With the ground trembling beneath them, it should be hard to aim a gun at them properly. The sole exception was Laminitus, who could use Crimson Wings to levitate in the air and attack them regardless of the spell.

However, her right hand was injured, so she wouldn't be able to fully exhibit her skills.

Besides, for a sole opponent, levitating up in the air would make them easy pickings for a Sorcerer. All you would have to do was use a spell with a wide range of attack that the opponent wouldn't be able to avoid.

With that in mind, Diablo glared at Laminitus. Not exhibiting even a hint of panic, she stood on the sand ship's deck, her own gaze fixed back at Diablo.

She was calm, as if she had predicted Diablo would use magic to create the chaos needed to escape.

—What is she thinking? Did she feel like we're stuck in a stalemate because of her injured arm? Or maybe...

She had her position to consider. Perhaps her methods were more complicated than just capturing the Demon Lord and killing those that defied her.

Slipping through the confused soldiers, Diablo and his group escaped the siege of the sand ships.

†

Rem, Shera, and Horn were all moderately experienced adventurers.

Lumachina, however, was struggling to keep up. Even so, they were somehow able to escape Zircon Tower's army without Diablo having to carry her in his arms.

They paused to hide behind a large rock. As Lumachina caught

her breath, Shera handed her a canteen. Shera was surprisingly well-prepared.

"I don't have much, but have some water. Looks like walking this much is hard on you... Is it because of the Death Knell disease?"

"N-No... It's just that, running on the sand...made me a bit tired. Your stamina is amazing. As one would expect of seasoned adventurers."

"Oh, I've been wanting to go on a journey forever, so I made sure to keep my legs in shape," Shera said, a bit awkwardly.

Rem nodded in agreement. "I've been training to build up my leg strength as well. Pantherians are also naturally good at running."

"Same here! Not being able to walk means death in a dungeon, after all," Horn said, a hint of pride in his voice.

Diablo didn't really work to stay in shape, but his level 150 body wouldn't be fatigued from a little running. This body was different from his real-life body, which would have him gasping for air just from climbing up a flight of stairs.

"You're all amazing." Lumachina narrowed her eyes, smiling. "I should make it a point to exercise, as well."

"Let's take a break here, OK?" Shera sat down next to her. "They won't be able to find us so easily here, and if they do show up, Diablo will work something out!"

"Very well."

"Lumachina, you don't go outside much, do you?"

"That is true. My position doesn't allow me to leave the sanctuary in the capital's Cathedral very often."

"Ohhh... So you were kinda like me."

"Like you...?"

"While she may seem be a bit dense," Rem interjected, "Shera is the Elven Princess. She's currently running away from home, though."

"Oh my!" Lumachina's eyes were wide with surprise.

After an embarrassed "Teehee," Shera shouted out angrily, "Wait a sec, Rem! What d'you mean, dense!?"

"...Pardon me. 'Dense' was a bit too vague, so I should have been more clear. Quite a blunder I've made there."

"I'm not dumb!"

The two began quarreling loudly like always. Their little catfights were an everyday occurrence by now.

Diablo turned, looking at the canteen Lumachina was holding.

Noticing his gaze, she asked, "Oh, do you want some water, my Lord?"

"No, that's not it."

But she was right, actually. After all the fighting last night, he was indeed thirsty. But he couldn't. If he were to take the canteen

Lumachina had been drinking from, and put his mouth to it...

—*Wouldn't that be an indirect kiss!?*

It would definitely show on his face. That just wouldn't be fitting for a Demon Lord.

As Diablo was tormented by the thought of how embarrassing an indirect kiss would be, Rem nodded in understanding.

"...You are being mindful of our rations and water, aren't you, Diablo?"

Diablo nodded sagely, with far more shallow thoughts on his mind.

"Indeed I was."

"...Having run from the army, we can't return to town anymore. But heading for the dungeon without food and water would be reckless."

"You can just leave that to me!" Horn rose to his feet.

"...What are you planning? I hope you're not intending on pilfering from the town."

"Of course not! I'm a Seeker, not a Thief!"

Diablo remembered how Horn had snuck in to steal some curry last night, but chose to keep quiet about that.

"The soldiers know what I look like," Horn carried on, "so there's no way I'm going back to town alone. We can't return to Zircon Tower without the treasure, at least."

"...So you're suggesting we stock up from the peddlers on the city outskirts?"

"That's not a bad idea, but I have something else in mind. So leave it to me. I'm gonna show off how useful I can be!"

"We won't just be needing food and water until nightfall, but a place to rest, too, you know?"

"I'll take care of everything!"

"...I will admit I am a bit dubious as to what you are planning, but since you are willing to say that much, I will trust you for now. You are the most experienced out of us all when it comes to clearing dungeons, after all."

"Leave it all to me!"

Diablo had to admit it was hard to take him seriously when he was that easygoing about it.

"How far is the dungeon from here?"

"A small sand ship could get you there in half a day, so on foot it should take you...two or three days or so?"

"I see."

Diablo's dungeon didn't appear on the field map in the game, it only existed as part of the setting. The place they were headed to was a place he knew better than anyone, but at the same time, was still

shrouded in mystery...

†

That evening—

They found themselves near one of the many rocks that dotted the desert. Taking refuge under the shade of the rock, they brushed the sand away to reveal a wooden plank.

A door...

Opening it, they discovered a hollow and a wooden staircase leading down into it.

“Wow, is this the dungeon!?” Shera asked with a shrill voice.

Rem heaved a sigh. “He said earlier the dungeon is still two or three days away. Isn’t this a sand ship?”

“Yup!” Horn nodded to her question. “A shipwreck. Couldn’t find any traces of people on it, so I think a monster sunk it.”

That meant the crew either jumped ship, or were eaten by the monster.

They walked down into the ship’s cabins, the wooden staircase creaking under the weight of their footsteps. Rem brushed her fingers across the wall, the surface crumbling briskly against her touch.

The place seemed quite old.

“...There’s food and water here...?”

“A-yup! This is my secret base. It’s super handy, so we can restock here for the dungeon without going back to town.”

“...Wouldn’t digging this up fetch you a small fortune?”

“I wish, but the cabins are the only thing left whole. The stern and bow of the ship are both gone.”

“...I see.”

Lumachina looked around the cabin. She brought her hands together in prayer, maybe to give thanks to God for providing them with this place, or perhaps to pray for the deceased souls of the sailors.

Shera sat on a chair. “It feels like a ghost could come out at any second now, doesn’t it?”

“Oh... Please don’t say that, I’m trying not think about it!”

“Ahahaha...” Shera laughed to avoid the issue.

Meanwhile, Rem wiped the sand off a circular table.

“...I suggest we rest here for today. Last night was exhausting, and we have a long way to go starting tomorrow.”

“Agreed!”

Shera raised her hand, and Horn nodded. Lumachina, however, clenched her fists.

“I... I will do my best.”

She wasn’t used to adventuring on foot, so she must have been

troubled. Half their journey from Faltra to Zircon Tower was either by carriage or sand ship, after all.

Rem turned her gaze to Diablo. "Are you all right with that, Diablo?"

"Huh? O-Oh, of course."

She asked for his opinion, as well. That made sense. It had been a while since he began working with Rem and Shera, but he still couldn't get used to working in a group. Without noticing, he assumed everyone deciding on their plans going forward had nothing to do with him. His old habits wouldn't be put down easily.

Horn carried food and water from the back of the cabin. "Let's roast them outside!"

"Yay, raisins!" Shera jumped for joy.

"We've got beef jerky and lots of other stuff, too. There's still some time until nightfall, so let's take the chance to cook outside."

"...Not a bad idea," Rem agreed, and so it was decided.

It was dry, preserved food, but they had been fighting since last night and spent all of today walking. That warm meal felt tastier than usual.



Laminitus returned to Zircon Tower. Some of the sand ships were damaged in the earthquake, and several soldiers were injured as well, though only to the extent of falling from the ship in the chaos, or tripping on the deck. It was through no fault of the troops' proficiency or skill.

That said, it was unusual to have gotten away after facing an opponent of Diablo's strength with no casualties.

Lowering herself to her large seat, Laminitus sighed. With their current forces, they were no match for Diablo.

In the next full moon, Varakness would also appear before her again. Would she be able to beat him, even if she was to take all this time to prepare?

—It would be difficult.

She would need to bolster her forces, somehow.

Someone was approaching her with a swift gait. They stopped before Laminitus and gave a perfectly motioned, well-disciplined salute.

Henric.

"Lady Laminitus, we believe we have discovered where the escaped adventurers are headed."

"Oh?"

"One of Zircon Tower's adventurers, Horn, was among them. He registered with the guild a year or so ago, and worked as a guide, escorting others through dungeons. It appears he has been adamant lately about going to a dungeon he recently discovered."

The Old Demon Lord's Domain had many magical beast nests and abandoned Fallen strongholds that served as dungeons. New dungeons were frequently being discovered, so that in and of itself wasn't unusual. The adventurer's fixation on exploring it, however, was another story.

"Was there anything of interest in that new dungeon?"

"According to the adventurers we've questioned, rather powerful monsters are stationed within, as well as weapons and tools endowed with powerful magic."

"Oh...?"

"They had equipment the likes of which I've never seen before, like a sword that spouts fire and a shield that blocks cold and ice."

—Perhaps that would give Our army the edge it needs?

"Heheh, what interesting information... Henric, pursue Diablo's party. As you do so, investigate that dungeon and bring back any special equipment you can find."

“Yes, Ma’am!” The young knight saluted again.

It was then that a soldier informed her of the arrival of another guest. Laminitus signaled to allow the guest to enter, and before long, a single man entered the room with a composed stride.

He had a tall and muscular body, with a longsword sheathed on his waist. Clad in blue armor emblazoned with the emblem of the church, he was clearly a Paladin.

He bowed respectfully.

“Greetings. I go by Gewalt, and I am a Paladin. Lady Laminitus, your noble name echoes valiantly even across the capital. To finally meet you is—”

“Spare Us the bootlicking, We are quite sick of it. We do not have an ear to lend to the Church’s demands. Begone—these are the only words We will spare for a dog of the capital.”

“Ah, n-no, make no mistake. I have not come here to relay the Church’s demands... I have heard our High Priest is in this city, and have come to guard and secure her person.”

Gewalt’s objective was, of course, entirely different. He had been contracted to assassinate Lumachina, but was defeated by Diablo before he could complete his mission. If he was to return to the capital now, he would be forced to face the price of failure, and would be silenced with death.

Not only was he useless at his task, he was also privy to secret information. There was no way his client would allow him to live. He would have to complete his assignment, and prove his worth.

Gewalt pursued Lumachina’s whereabouts to this place, but the Paladin Captain Batutta’s estate, where she should have been lodged, was half-destroyed. He had lost track of her.

—The way things are going, they’ll kill me! I’m not letting that little slut get away!

Gewalt forced a smile, trying to stifle the dark flames that flared up in his heart.

“She is capable of receiving God’s oracle, so keeping the High Priest safe is the highest priority of the Church. I ask of you as the governor of Zircon Tower: Could you lend me your aid in finding her whereabouts?”

Laminitus glared at him. Any governor would normally be pleased to cooperate and have the Church in their debt. The Church’s influence was just that vast.

But she was different. Laminitus held an aversion for anyone else that would hold influence over her territory. This was the former Demon Lord’s Domain, a place where mankind’s strength was concentrated to overcome countless challenges. Anyone that could

potentially oppose the governor's views wouldn't be tolerated.

"Hmph. A Paladin, huh..."

Laminitus had to consider that.

—I could turn him away, but...Paladins are said to boast a level of at least 100, and are bearers of great power.

Right now, she needed every bit of fighting power on her side.

That said, if she was to simply tell him, "The Fallen are coming, cooperate with Us," it was unlikely he would help. His objective was apparently only about defending High Priest Lumachina.

"We already have a grasp on where she is."

"Is that true!?"

"The High Priest is headed to a certain dungeon, alongside a peculiar Sorcerer."

"A Sorcerer... A Demon who goes by the name Diablo, I take it?"

Gewalt's tone had become much more masculine than before. Laminitus, who didn't care much for small details, simply ignored that.

"We see you know him already."

"That foul cretin deceived our naïve High Priest and abducted her!" Gewalt declared.

However, Laminitus cared little for the circumstances of the Church.

"There is unique, unheard of equipment in the dungeon they were headed to. That is what We are interested in. If you help us recover that equipment, Our men will escort you to the High Priest."

"Oh! Of course, I will be glad to help!"

Gewalt brought his hands together in a gesture of deep gratitude. In his mind, however, he thought, *So long as I get my hands on Lumachina, who cares about the rest!*

Laminitus didn't assume the Paladin would cooperate with her fully. But she had only dispatched Henric and a few people under his command. She was unsure as to how reliable they would be. If the Paladin could help them even half the way through, that would be enough.

"We do not care if you prioritize the High Priest's safety, but until you find her, cooperate with Our men. If you can promise Us that, We will help you achieve your goal."

"Thank you oh so very much! I swear it on the Lord's name!"

Gewalt made the holy sign before his chest.

Laminitus nodded.

With the matter decided, Henric extended his right hand. "It is most reassuring to receive the help of the renowned Paladin Gewalt. I look forward to working with you."

"My goodness, you're cuter than I thought..."

“Beg pardon...?”

“Oh, nothing. Likewise, it is a pleasure to be working with you.”

Gewalt grasped Henric’s extended right hand tightly with both of his own.

†

“《Explosion》!”

Three days later—

They found a building that looked as if it had only later been added to the desert. Stone doors served as the entrance to this triangular, pyramid-like structure, with large stone lion statues standing guard, forbidding one and all from trespassing.

Diablo’s magic ran rampant, forming a curtain of black smoke. The moving statues that were garrisoned before the structure’s entrance were sent flying, tumbling over the sand. They were adorned with eagle’s wings and snake tails—in other words, Chimeras—and capable of using a breath attack and lightning magic...which they would have, had they been given the chance to attack.

The moving statues fell silent.

“Wow! You’re amazing, Boss!” Horn clapped his hands enthusiastically.

“Of course I am. This doesn’t even constitute as a warm up.”

“I came with the strongest Warrior in town last time, and he had a hard time handling these monsters.”

“What level was Zircon Tower’s strongest Warrior?”

“I think about 80?”

“Hmm...”

That wasn’t that low of a level... Maybe their equipment was bad. The quality of the weapons on sale in this world was low compared to *Cross Reverie*.

Diablo’s dungeon was set to regulate the monsters’ strength in response to the player’s. Even if he didn’t understand the reasoning behind it, this should be the dungeon from Diablo’s private area. Other players were supposed to collect special items called 《Treasure Map Fragments》 to earn the right to challenge the dungeon. Diablo’s own party didn’t carry any Treasure Map Fragments, though, so that setting was apparently unique to the game.

Personal dungeons were built so that once cleared, the player could challenge their designers—in this case, Diablo—to a battle. Incidentally, players who had already cleared the dungeon once could ask for a rematch whenever they wanted, though it required a special item.

In *Cross Reverie*, events where players had to team up to beat large

monsters were standard. There were solo battle events as well, but those weren't the main focus of the game.

Normally there weren't that many challengers, but Diablo's Demon Lord role playing earned him a reputation, and many players requested a chance to duel him.

—Never thought I'd live to see the day where I'd be the one challenging my own dungeon...

In-game, he was able to freely enter and exit the dungeon and transport himself to the dungeon's deepest level in an instant. But nothing was happening now that he was visiting it in this world.

Of course, if a status screen was to pop up, or a message asking, "What floor would you like to go to?" Diablo would probably be even more shocked.

Anxiety filled Diablo's heart again.

—Is this really my dungeon? I guess the only way to find out is by going in...

The charred lion statues wobbled their way back to their original positions, cracks running through their magnificent manes. In the game, they would proceed to await the next challenger without any visible damage, but in this world, naturally enough, they were being gradually worn down. Maybe one day they would be completely destroyed, or maybe there was some means of repairing them.

The stone statues stood silent as Shera walked over to the doors.

"So this is the dungeon we were looking for? We finally made it!"

"Forgive me... Me being so slow turned this into a four day journey."

"Heehee, it's not your fault, Lumachina. Don't worry about it, we don't mind a bit of lost time."

Shera tried to encourage Lumachina, unfounded as that claim may be. It was important to stay realistic, but Diablo thought those sorts of groundless words of kindness could be meaningful at times. If nothing else, it served to keep the girls' morale up.

The only issue was that the fifth mark had surfaced on Lumachina's skin... Only four remained.

As they were heading for the gate, Rem spoke to Horn. "...I'm a bit surprised."

"Hmm? What about?"

"...I'm sorry if this sounds rude, but...over the last few days I've been watching you, and believed your strength to be around level 20."

"Huh!? Oh... Well, maybe that's true in terms of combat... I am a Seeker, after all!"

"...To be honest, I kept asking myself, 'Will he be useless to us as a guide?' Please forgive me."

“Wha...!? Ha, haha... No, no way... I’m super useful...you know?”

“...Yes, if a level 80 Warrior was willing to form a party with you, it must mean they had acknowledged your skills. I will be looking forward to seeing you in action. If you are ever in need of help, do not hesitate to ask.”

“Oh, umm... Thanks...”

Horn forced a stiff smile. The expression on Horn’s face was one Diablo knew all too well.

—That’s the face a person without confidence makes when others expect something from them, and they know they can’t deliver but can’t say anything.

In all likelihood, Horn’s full power really was level 20.

Diablo recalled how Horn was arguing in town about his share of the spoils from the dungeon; how the Pantherian Warrior had cursed at him, calling him “good-for-nothing.” That Pantherian may have been that level 80, strongest Warrior in town Horn mentioned.

Diablo was walking behind everyone, deep in thought.

Shera pressed her weight against the gates.

“Heave-ho!”

The gates began pushing open with a creaking sound.

Rem shrugged. “Have you considered the possibility that a trap may go off?”

“Eek!”

“...I was joking. Horn was here once before, so if there were any traps around he would have warned us.”

“G-Geez, don’t startle me!”

“...But do be careful going forward. If nothing else, try not to get us involved in your slip-ups.”

“Booo,” Shera moaned, disgruntled.

“You may say that, but you’re actually worried for Miss Shera, aren’t you, Miss Rem?” Lumachina smiled wryly.

“What? She is!?”

“Hehe, yes, I’m sure of it.”

“I see, I see! Teehee!” Shera smiled with satisfaction.

Rem passed her by with a displeased expression on her face. “Lumachina, please do not put any silly ideas in her head. I really don’t want to get myself involved in that dumb Elf’s mishaps. Horn, can we count on you to lead the way?”

“You got it!”

Leaving the four to their little exchange, Diablo advanced inside the dungeon, descending down a stone stairway. Some parts of the ceiling were lit, so it was never so dark that he couldn’t see where he

was going.

Rem and the others caught up to him in a hurry.

“W-Wait up, Diablo... Why are you going forward?”

“Hmm? There aren’t any enemies in our way, are there?”

“...That’s...true. I know how strong you are, but shouldn’t we approach this dungeon with a bit more caution?”

In the end, Diablo never told them he was the one who made this dungeon, because he had no idea how to explain it. He also couldn’t tell them he remembered how all the monsters and traps were spread out. And if they were to ask why he needed Horn to guide him here, or why he wasn’t sure the dungeon had existed until now? He really didn’t have any good answers to those questions.

What was he supposed to say? “In the game all I had to do was click a button on the menu”?

Left with no other choice, he fell back to his Demon Lord persona.

“Make no mistake, you fools. I am no ally of yours. I am merely allowing you to accompany me. Shut those blabbering mouths of yours and follow me!”

—I know everything about this dungeon, so you should all be safe if you just stay behind me.

That’s what he was trying to convey, but had that gotten through to them? He hoped it did.

Rem covered her feline ears. “Y-Yes. I’m sorry.”

Uneasiness filled Shera and Lumachina’s expressions as well, and Horn was frozen in terror.

It totally backfired. All his words served to do was sour the mood.

—This is why playing in a party is such an impossible choke point! Challenging the last boss all on your own is way easier than this!

After pondering for a few moments, he pressed on silently, with Rem and the others following suit.

Shera had spent the last few days encouraging Lumachina, who was trying to remain firm in the face of her plight, and managed to genuinely cheer her up. And now Diablo completely ruined that because of his careless words.

But putting that aside, as a party their lineup wasn’t bad. Diablo, who was familiar with the dungeon and the strongest of them, served as vanguard. Then they had Rem, a Summoner. Next were Shera, a high level Archer (insisting she’s a summoner), and Lumachina, who served as a Healer. Lastly, Horn was a Seeker that excelled at scouting.

Maybe because of how heavy the atmosphere had become, everyone was silent since entering the dungeon. There weren’t even the sounds of the wind or any foliage.

—Come to think of it, there's no background music in this world..

Cross Reverie's music was of fairly high quality, and was well-received by the players. The developers even held real-life musical events, with orchestral performances and live concerts with the game's voice actors.

Not that he ever went to any of them, of course. A shut-in gamer would never go to a normie event like that, though he did watch videos of it later...

Players who played together as couples frequented these concerts. Some would write "I took my girlfriend to the live concert!" on their profiles, and Diablo would shower them with massive magic if he so much as spotted them in town.

—If you're that happy in real life, I guess I'll have to make you suffer in-game, then!

Those were the kind of pessimistic, detestable, dark feelings that spurred Diablo forward.

Rem and Shera were whispering, as if speaking in secret.

"Hey, hey, why do you think Diablo's acting so scary?"

"...Who knows. He's been acting odd ever since we entered the dungeon."

"Did we do something to make him angry?"

Everything had become awkward. Diablo wanted to patch things up somehow, but couldn't think of anything witty to say to lighten the mood.

—Aaah, to hell with guys that just hang around girls like it's nothing!

Chapter 2: Clearing a Dungeon

One elevator ride down was all it would have taken to get down to the thirteenth level.

But sadly, this world didn't have that sort of convenient shortcut. When it came to traversing the dungeon, it was designed with a very stoic, old-fashioned, bare-bones difficulty to it.

—Honestly, this world really is merciless in how real it feels...

The door to the first floor had a sign that said, "No capture the flag—only deathmatch."

In the game it was written in Japanese, but this time it was written in the local language. Diablo couldn't read it, and had Rem read it for him, before explaining the meaning to the others:

"We have to beat all the monsters on this floor to get the staircase for the next one to appear. They're all low-level monsters, though."

Horn nodded at his words. "Some of the monsters hide, too. Finding them was a pain last time."

"...Hmm... You really do know about it, don't you, Diablo?" Rem said timidly.

"Hmm?"

"I mean this dungeon... How are you so familiar about it? You also seem to know a lot about the former Demon Lord's Domain... But it should be the first time you came here since being summoned from the other world, and it looked like you didn't know where the dungeon was without Horn to show you the way."

It's only natural they would think it's odd, seeing as he knew the place so well on the inside when he hadn't even known where it was outside.

He tried to think of a good excuse, but if he was the type of person who could think of something that witty, he wouldn't be known for yadda yadda...

"It is because I am a Demon Lord."

"I...see." Rem didn't seem terribly satisfied with that answer, naturally enough.

Diablo cast his gaze on Lumachina; she was running out of time.

"Let us hurry, for the time being."

“Very well...”

Rem was rational and wise, and knew to just let the topic go, at least for the time being.

They stood at the entrance of a maze. A series of stone walls formed the winding, convoluted labyrinth before them. The monsters of the first level of the dungeon were all low-leveled, but finding them in this complex maze was what made it into a challenging quest you could get lost in.

The monsters would spawn at random, and even Diablo had no way of knowing where they'd appear. Some of them were camouflaged with the floor or walls, and some would drop down on the player from the ceiling as they approached. As the one who planned it, Diablo honestly hoped he could enjoy this dungeon, but...

—*Sad to say, I don't have the time for that right now.*

Diablo pointed Tenma's Staff to the darkness. Thanks to Lumachina's slow pace making the journey take more days than it should have, he had recovered a bit more MP. He should have replenished roughly a third of his total MP by now, so using a slightly stronger spell shouldn't be an issue.

“《Virus Cloud》!”

A curtain of wind appeared before his eyes; beyond it, a black cloud expanded. The black gas cloud spread into the dungeon, with the presence of monsters stationed throughout the maze gradually disappearing.

“...Diablo, what was that?” Rem asked with a frightened voice.

“Poison magic.”

It was a level 110 Wind and Darkness spell. It was effective for eliminating weak monsters in small spaces like this maze, though it didn't work on monsters that didn't breathe air.

“P-Poison?”

“There's no need for us to waste our time smoking out and fighting all these monsters.”

“That's true, but...is it safe for us to pass?”

“Calm yourself. The spell doesn't last long.”

In the game it lasted sixty seconds, but distance and time behaved differently in this world. In the end, it took the gas cloud five minutes to dissipate, and a thud could be heard from the depths of the dungeon.

“The staircase should have appeared now.”

It seemed the monsters had been completely wiped out.

—*I can't say I like this cheat very much, being the dungeon's designer and all...*

Putting that thought behind him, Diablo decided to simply progress to the next level.

†

The staircase, that looked to have been carved out of the bedrock, led them in a downward spiral. Usually, the game would skip this part.

“Magnificent... I’ve never seen such an impressive structure before...” said Rem, her eyes wide open.

“Me neither!” Shera agreed with admiration as she ran her fingers against the wall.

Horn nodded again. “I was super shocked the first time I saw it, too!”

“Even the Cathedral in the capital pales in comparison to this place. It may very well have been built by someone other than the races.”

“...It is very possible.” Rem nodded at Lumachina’s suggestion. “Perhaps it was formed using great magic, like the Zircon Tower.”

Zircon Tower, the symbol of the region, was crafted with translucent gemstones. It was impervious to damage by normal means, and the races had no idea how to even create it, for it was supposedly made by Fallen.

Diablo and his group made their way to the second floor.

The Transforming Maze

“This maze changes its shape as time passes. There should be monsters prowling about, as well. ”

As the player became more and more lost and gradually lost their nerve, the wall behind them opened and a monster would get the drop on them— That was the sort of exciting production Diablo had in mind.

“...A maze that transforms?” Rem said, pensively. “Finding the way through sounds difficult...”

“I bet it’ll be hard getting back to the entrance if we got separated...” Shera said anxiously.

“...If that happens, we may not be able to regroup at all. You would probably be eaten by a monster, starve to death, or fall to a trap.”

“Eeek!?”

“...Oh, you’ll be fine, Shera. I’m sure someone will come along eventually, though you may well be reduced to bleached bones by then...”

“That doesn’t sound fine at all!” Shera clung to Diablo’s arm, her

two soft swellings squishing against him. “Y-You can’t leave me behind, Diablo!”

She had grabbed onto him so abruptly, he winced without noticing. No Demon Lord-worthy lines that would soothe a frightened girl in a dungeon readily came to mind. But he couldn’t just let her stick to him like this; it would be hard to fight if she clung to his arm when a monster attacked.

“Let go.”

“Oooh...” She looked like she was about to burst into tears.

—*What am I supposed to do in a situation like this!?*

“There is nothing to fear.” Lumachina gently laid her hands on Shera’s shoulders. “Let us believe in Lord Diablo. If we act discouraged, that would surely get in his way when danger descends upon us.”

“Y-Yeah...you’re right... Sorry, Diablo...”

“Hmph.”

While feeling a bit reluctant to part with the softness pressing against him, Diablo was relieved. He’d be too nervous to focus on clearing the dungeon properly with those two melons pushing against him.

“This is the map I drew the last time I was here.” Horn spread out a roll of parchment. “The maze has probably changed since then, though.”

“...Come to think of it, you said you made it to the third floor, Horn?”

“A-yup. There was this room swarming with monsters down there. It was really hard.”

“How long was this maze?”

“It took us about half a day.”

—*That long!?*

Diablo was surprised, and for good reason. In the game, it should have taken five or ten minutes to clear the transforming maze...

Incidentally, it took only a few minutes to get to Faltra from Starfall Tower in-game, but it totaled five hours in this world.

Maybe the maze had become far more stretched out and complicated than Diablo initially thought. If they were to try and clear it normally, there was a good chance it would indeed take them half a day to get through.

—*What should I do...?*

Diablo’s gaze focused on one of the walls. It was made of stone, and had the thickness of two bricks. The walls weren’t made too dense so they could still be mobile.

—*In the game, magic had no effect on the terrain itself. But in this world, it does...*

It was worth a shot—

“《Flare Burst》!”

A roaring explosion resounded. A sequence of concentrated detonations destroyed the target, blowing away several layers of the wall and leaving gaps that lead deeper into the maze. The gaps were large enough to pass through.

If the staircase to the next floor had changed position compared to the game, then he would have opened all these holes for nothing... But judging from his experience so far, even if the distance to something was different, its position stayed the same.

“All right...”

He turned around—only to find Rem and the others staring at him with their mouths agape.

“That was amazing! We can get through the maze in no time with this!” Shera exclaimed, her eyes alight with excitement.

“This much should be obvious. I am a Demon Lord, after all.”

His tone was indifferent, as if to say this wasn’t something to take pride in, but really, he was just as surprised as them.

—*Never thought it’d go this smoothly!*

Magic in the game occasionally had visual effects like the ground being torn apart, but it never actually changed the terrain. This was only possible here, in the other world.

“As astounding as ever, Lord Diablo,” Lumachina said as she regarded the collapsed wall with an impressed expression.

Horn was, like always, frightened and surprised. For an adventurer, he was certainly lacking some guts.

The ground began rumbling as several walls started moving around them.

“Stay close together. We won’t be going back for you if you get lost.”

At Diablo’s chiding, Horn and Lumachina passed through the hole in a hurry.

†

The door to the third floor had “F43” written on it, in this world’s language. Being as short as it was, though, Diablo could make sense of it.

—*So that’s how you write it here... It probably wouldn’t be too bad to learn Lyferia’s language.*

The idea behind this level was an homage to an old retro game... But since that game didn’t exist in this world, there were basically no hints as to how to solve it.

Essentially, you would have to defeat different colored slimes in a certain order to unlock the staircase to the next floor. Their

positioning and movement patterns were all random, but since the slimes were slow to move and the maze wasn't particularly large, they cleared it in no time.

The fourth floor—

Think you can handle the next level!?

The moment they passed through the door, waves of heat washed over them.

“W-What is this?” Rem’s expression distorted in surprise.

“Heee! Rem, look at that!” Shera shrieked, peeking down from the rockbed that served as their footing.

There they saw a pool of bright red, seething lava. The smoldering temperatures emanating from it filled the room with scorching heat.

“...There shouldn’t be any volcanoes in the area,” Rem said suspiciously. “And we haven’t traveled so deep underground that we would normally find lava. Is this some sort of magical illusion?”

“Would an illusion be so...hot?” Lumachina asked, dripping with sweat. Maybe she had a hard time in hot places.

“...True, this doesn’t seem to be an illusion.” Rem wiped some sweat off her forehead. “But I believe it is safe to assume this lava was summoned by way of magic.”

“Whatever it is, let’s just go! If we stay here any longer, I’ll turn into Grasswalker pie!”

Horn’s plea was a justified one, but looking onward, the rockbed they were standing on was cut short a few steps away where they were standing.

A pit full of lava laid beyond, with wires extending from one side of the ravine to the other. A gondola moved along those wires.

“...Maybe we can ride this to get to the other side?”

“Ouchie!”

Touching the metallic gondola’s surface, Shera squealed loudly, her fingertips red. It seemed she burned herself.

“Oh my...” Lumachina held out a hand. “Divine God who resides in the blessed earth, give mercy onto your pious believer... 《Cure Light》!”

Light spilled out from Lumachina’s hands, healing Shera’s burned fingers in an instant. The elf princess grinned with gratitude.

“Wow, Lumachina! Thanks!”

“Any appreciation you feel should be directed not at me, but at God.”

“Right! Thanks a million, God!”

“...You can tell how hot this place is, so why are you touching a metallic gondola, you stupid, dumb elf?” Rem sighed in exasperation.

“Even God is going to run out of patience with you eventually.”

“But I wanted to see how it moves!”

“Then you should have at least put leather gloves on!”

“Oh, right! We have those, don’t we...”

Rem had her iron gauntlets on. She was a summoner, but was also capable of using her fists in close quarters combat, and carried gauntlets as her weapon of choice.

“Rem, aren’t you hot, too?” Lumachina asked.

“...Why, yes, I am...”

“I feel like I’m dying here...” Horn was the most exhausted of the group.

—An offensive Seeker, and a boy at that, losing strength before two girls, one of them being a Healer, no less. How pathetic is that!? You don’t just look like a kid, you’re as weak as one on the inside, too!

That said, Diablo never imagined it would be this hot. He designed both the lava and gondola, but in-game they were just graphics designed to look like a hot, burning cave. Standing in the real thing felt like he was being cooked alive.

—If we don’t clear this floor quickly, we’ll all get dehydrated to death.

They boarded the gondola, and with the pull of a lever, they began moving across the ravine, the compartment jolting and rocking the whole way.

“It’s shaking, shaking!” Shera clamored hysterically.

Rem glared her down. “Be quiet, there may be monsters around. Are you trying to get us spotted?”

“Ah, yeah...”

“You can rest easy.” Diablo shrugged. “There should be no monsters positioned on the fourth floor. However, there is more to this than just being swung around on the gondola. It is now when we will experience the true horror of this dungeon.”

“..W-What do you mean?”

The gondola suddenly stopped, and Horn let out a high-pitched scream.

“Aaaaah, it stopped! We’re done for! We’ll get fried to death in here!”

“Silence. If you’re so hot, take off your useless equipment. Normal, unenchanted leather armor will do nothing but weigh you down against the monsters waiting ahead.”

“Ohhh...”

“Don’t bother yourself with that and concentrate on getting your questions right. Your turn will come before long.”

“Huh?”

A *ding, ding, ding* resounded, as if someone was ringing a bell.

“Do you want to pass through here!? Oooooooh!!!”

A voice bellowed at them from out of nowhere.

Diablo wiped the sweat from his face. He never would have dreamed he'd ever have to go through this, and with a party no less... This truly was the worst.

“We will now be holding a quiz! If you get your question right, the gondola will progress! If you get it wrong, the wires will slacken! Will it be heaven, or hell!? It's a lava-crossing, heart-thumping, ultra super quiz!!!”

—There was this TV show I was watching when I made this level. For some reason I stayed up three nights straight watching it, and was really hooked on it.

But experiencing it live, Diablo finally realized...

This is too cringy...

He wished he could go back in time and tell himself to just not put this in. If he could, he wanted to completely renovate this level. As soon as possible. Like, right now.

Yet another reason to not tell the others he made this dungeon...

“The entire party will take turns answering questions in this quiz!”

Diablo's jaw clenched. He was the one who made the quiz, so he could answer any question, no matter the difficulty. But the rules said everyone had to participate. If anyone wasn't smart enough to get his question right, he'd be pulling everyone down.

It was a rule meant to break friendships.

Parties often had successful and useless members. This rule was designed to smoke out the losers, make them get the whole group in trouble, and be chastised by the group. It was just like a class-wide jump-rope contest: If even one person got the timing to jump wrong, the whole class failed. A vicious rule, meant only to expose useless party members.

—Well, it wouldn't really work with friends close enough to talk through chat or in real life.

But the issue with this floor was if Rem and the others would be able to clear a quiz full of *Cross Reverie* trivia. This was another world, with no chat programs, phones, or friends in your room to consult.

“Question! Which one has no effect on a Cyclops Crocodile? Magic or weapons?”

Rem raised her hand. “That would be magic.”

Even though the quiz had started so suddenly, Rem unflinchingly volunteered to answer first. Her reasoning and assertiveness were extraordinary. After a moment of silence...

“The answer is... Magic has no effect on it! Fantastic!”

The gondola jolted as it progressed several meters toward the exit.

“At this pace, we only need to correctly answer five more times to reach the other side.” Rem nodded with satisfaction.

“Indeed,” was Diablo’s response.

“This’ll be a walk in the park! Lemme answer next!” Horn rolled up his sleeves.

“Question! Does the Madara Snake live in water, on the treetops, or in holes in the ground?”

“Uhm... I-In holes in the ground!”

“Bzzzt! The correct answer is... In water!”

“Wha—”

Horn looked mortified, Rem and Shera screamed in horror, and Diablo sighed. Even without saying a word, the party’s chiding rang very clear.

This was the truly fearsome nature of the friendship breaking rule.

“One gondola, going down, down, down!!!”

The supporting wires slackened, and the gondola lurched downward.

“Kya!?”

Diablo caught Lumachina, who had lost her balance.

“Be careful.”

“T-Thank you very much.”

If anyone else got burned, Lumachina’s miracles could heal them, but if she was hurt, no one would be able to help her. True, HP potions could heal her, but... When Paladin Captain Batutta had reduced his HP to virtually nothing, Diablo had to use all the potions he had on hand. He was completely out now.

The heat had only grown more intense as they drew closer to the lava. Rem removed her gauntlets, and also took off her belt that carried all her summoning crystals, choosing to carry it by hand instead.

“Whew...”

“It’s soooo hot!”

Shera removed her cape and flapped the hem of her skirt, fanning herself in an attempt to stave off the heat.

“It really is very hot...” Lumachina also removed her cape. “I’m getting dizzy, to be quite honest.”

“Ugh...”

Only Horn, dripping with sweat, refused to take off his clothes. Maybe he was trying to show off his tolerance and act up his manliness?

Diablo also wanted to take off his cloak, but stubbornly decided against it, as it wouldn’t be “Demon Lord-like.”

Shera raised both hands in the air. “All right, me, me! I’ll answer next!”

“Question! How many gates does the citadel city of Faltra have? Four, eight, or more?”

“Ah...!” Rem raised her voice.

Diablo knew how she felt, but...

“Whoa there! If you give hints or do anything to give away the answer, it’ll be automatically counted as incorrect!”

Rem stopped herself in a hurry. Diablo’s gaze was fixed on Shera.

—Notice it! Notice it! Don’t fall for it!

Shera nodded, her eyes shining as if to say, “I got it!”

“Hehe, Faltra has two walls, and each has four gates, so that makes eight!”

“Bzzzt! The correct answer is... More than eight! There are many ‘gates’ in Faltra, and the question never mentioned ‘city gates!’”

“Huuuh!? Wait, that’s not fair!”

A typical trick question; whoever made this quiz was one nasty bastard.

—Well, I guess this is me we’re talking about here...

The gondola descended once again, drawing ever closer to the lava.

“It’s so hoooooot!”

Shera finally began undressing. Rem’s eyes widened like saucers.

“W-What do you think you’re doing!?”

“Look at how hot it is! I can’t focus on solving riddles like this!”

“...Y-You may be right... Come to think of it, this is all for the sake of clearing the dungeon...”

Somehow convinced by Shera's dubious logic, Rem also began undressing herself.

"That's so...shameless..." Lumachina's face went red.

"...Adventurers prioritize survival over dignity. This is strategy. It is the same as when we are bathing. Anyone who thinks this is shameless is the real pervert here."

In the face of Rem's somewhat overly serious semantics, Lumachina seemed oddly convinced, and began taking off her own rather thick robes, as well.

Horn, still in his light armor, let out a peculiar wheezing sound as he passed out in the gondola. The heat had finally gotten to him.

Having stripped down to her underwear, Lumachina pumped her fists. "I believe it's time for my turn?"

"Question! Which of the following monsters is the largest? Sand Whale, Green Behemoth, or Legend Dragon?"

Panic overtook Diablo. Of all the possible questions, she got one that was aimed for high-level players. Players in the game may know the answer if they had participated in large-group raid events, but...in all likelihood, Lumachina had probably never seen those monsters. She only recently saw a Sand Whale when it attacked Zircon Tower.

"According to the tomes I've read in the Capital's library, it should be a Legend Dragon," Lumachina answered.

"The correct answer is... Legend Dragon! Full marks!"

"Yayyy! Lumachina, you're so smart!" Shera said as she hugged Lumachina, though the two soon parted with a smile, complaining together, "It's so hoooot..."

As one would expect of a High Priest, Lumachina was erudite and wise. Her power over miracles was as vast as it was for good reason.

The gondola progressed. Beads of sweat rolled down the girls' bodies, the droplets dripping off their smooth, fair skins. Their bodies heaved as they breathed in heavy, labored sighs, their cheeks flushed with color and the look in their eyes gradually taking on a glossy, moist sheen.

As Diablo looked at them, he found himself overwhelmed by a peculiar sensation. They were only suffering from the heat, so why did he feel so embarrassed?

—Is the heat messing with my head?

A desire to reach his hand out to the girls spurred him.

—No, no, this is absurd.

The girls were his party members, and they were currently in the

middle of clearing a dungeon. The only reason they had taken their clothes off was because of the lava's heat.

"Anyone who thinks this is shameless is the real pervert here."

"Hmm... Diablo... It's your turn next...right?" Shera asked, panting.

"...Please... Get it right... If it gets any hotter than this, we'll have to take our underwear off..." Rem implored him, wiping sweat from her modest bosom.

"She is right, my underwear is already sopping wet with sweat..." Lumachina said with her face flushed red, pinching her moist panties.

—If I get it wrong, they'll be completely naked...!?

Diablo could hear his heart beating violently like a drum in his chest. Thick beads of sweat rolled down his own forehead.

"Question! When did Cross Reverie begin its service? January, April, or September?"

A meta question—

The girls tilted their heads, baffled as they couldn't fathom what the question even meant.

Diablo, of course, knew the answer...

—Completely. Naked...

Diablo shook his head, trying to banish those thoughts from his mind.

No no no! Is this some kind of joke!? I'm a Demon Lord; the Demon Lord Diablo, damn it! MMORPGs are more than just a game, they're serious business! This is my way of life, and I can't let it be denied like this!

"September. The early access period was planned for April, but got delayed twice and ended up being in September. The game officially launched in January of next year."

"That is...correct!"

After another round of questions, the quiz ended easily enough. Diablo and Rem answered the two remaining questions, and the group safely reached the other side. The moment they passed through the door leading to the next level, the lava's heat disappeared, as if it was all a bad, blistering dream...

Interlude 1

The soldier sent to scout out what lay beyond the door hurried back with a brisk gait. He suppressed his voice, but wasn't able to mask his excitement.

"I've found them!"

The Knight, Henric, responded to his report with a nod.

They were standing right before the entrance to the fourth level of the dungeon, near the staircase.

"The heat is unbelievable..." The soldier wiped the sweat from his brow. "There's lava beneath the floor...conjured by magic, no doubt."

"This place is one surprise after another," Henric mused, folding his arms.

"Aye, the first level with all its monsters poisoned to death, and the second level with the broken walls... There's something terribly off about this place."

"Retrieving the items Lady Laminitus asked for has been proceeding smoothly, though, thanks in no small part to these convenient oddities."

"Certainly."

However, they still had to deploy one hundred soldiers into the dungeon for that purpose alone. A mere group of twenty was all they could relegate to chasing Diablo down to the fourth level.

Within that group was the Paladin, Gewalt.

"And? What contrived traps does this fourth level have?" Gewalt asked.

The soldier saluted him. "Yes! Some manner of...voice, seems to be speaking in riddles."

"Riddles? Can't say I'm following you here..."

"It appears up to six people are to ride a gondola to the other side of a ravine, then take turns in answering the voice's riddles. If they answer correctly, the gondola moves closer to the other side. Should they get it wrong, the gondola drops closer to the lava."

"Ohoho... Quite fascinating... This is some extraordinary, high-level magic we're dealing with here. Since this voice seems to speak our language, it stands to reason this place was made by the races, but..."

Even the capital's Mage's Association wouldn't be able to create

something of this scale. The mere existence of this structure was a monumental discovery in and of itself. The governor Laminitus and her troops had their eyes set on the enchanted gear scattered about the place, but the truly valuable thing was the dungeon itself.

Every now and then, the races would discover unique weapons and armor. They were seemingly created for use by the races...yet were made of knowledge far beyond the grasp of any of them.

Those were the divine treasures made by the gods, known as 《Regalia》.

This dungeon was undoubtedly a Regalia. And according to the adventurer's guild, no adventurer had managed to reach this dungeon's lowest level.

—Just reporting this place to the Church should fetch me a pretty penny.

Henric picked out a few soldiers. “Four of the more quick-witted of you lot will accompany Sir Gewalt and me as we push forward. Once the gondola returns, the rest of you are to find a way and join us. But don't hesitate to withdraw if you feel your lives are at risk.”

“Yes, Sir!”

“Don't forget, our true duty is to defend Lady Laminitus. Of course, retrieving any powerful equipment and looking into Sorcerer Diablo is important, but we are no good to our Lady should we die in this place.”

“Understood, Sir!”

“Good answer, men!” Henric was the very image of a model knight.

“Are you merely investigating Diablo?” Gewalt asked.

“Yes. Lady Laminitus seems to hold the fact he defended Zircon Tower in high regard, and believes that, regardless of his claims of being a Demon Lord, there may be a chance to cooperate with him.”

“Is that so...”

It seemed Diablo had repelled some massive magical beast that threatened Zircon Tower.

—Is he trying to be some sort of hero of justice? That's so pathetic I think I'm going to be sick!

Still cursing vehemently to himself, Gewalt regarded the knight with a friendly grin.

“You do know my purpose is to safeguard Lady Lumachina, yes?”

“We of course intend to cooperate with you on the matter. But the High Priest is currently afflicted with Death Knell disease.”

“That she is.”

“Diablo claims to have come here in search of a treasure capable of curing that plague. I wouldn't normally be inclined to believe him, but he is an immensely powerful Sorcerer.”

“I know how you feel. When it comes from him, it really makes you believe his words, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. Lady Laminitus instructed us to help Diablo find the treasure.”

“Oh, I see.”

“As soon as we cross this lava, we should catch up and be able to help them.”

“Yes, yes, we should hurry.”

“It won’t be long now. We’re almost in arm’s reach of them.”

—*So, we’ll be regrouping with them, will we?*

The scout returned and gave another report. It appeared Diablo and his group had already made their way to the next level.

And also, something about them taking off their clothes due to the heat...

Finally, he reported the gondola had made its way back here.

“Very well.” Henric nodded at the soldier. “Let’s head out!”

“Hmm... I think I’ve gotten enough use out of you boys... This is the end of the line for you, all right?”

Gewalt tossed a crystal at the ground.

“Huh?”

A large shadow was cast over the soldiers. A huge Summoned appeared, its head reaching up to the cave’s ceiling and generating a small rain of pebbles from above. It opened its jaw, revealing a mouth lined with razor sharp teeth.

“Gaaah!”

As it exhaled a breath reeking of rot and decay, each of its arms, thicker than a tree’s trunk, brandished a massive hammer. It was large enough to crush a person.

The soldiers looking up at it stiffened in horror.

“W-What is this!?” Henric’s eyes shot open. “Why did you...do this...!? A Summon? Why? Why, Sir Gewalt... What are you doing!?”

“You know, you really were a cute, good man... But I’m so sorry, I’m just the type of girl that lives for her career. Now that I have tracked down the High Priest, I don’t need you insignificant insects getting in my way. Todeloo, boys~”

“What did you—!?”

Henric reached to unsheathe his sword. Gewalt smiled a diabolical smile and winked in a flashy, overblown fashion.

“Smash them, 《Arch-Demon》, and make extra sure you crush their balls while you’re at it!”

“Oooooooooooooooooohhhh—!!”

The Summon’s massive hammer swung down from the ceiling.

Henric's silver longsword snapped under its weight like a twig—

The distinctive crunching sound of bones being crushed echoed across the cave.

Chapter 3: Clearing a Dungeon, Part Two

The fifth level—

“@Master, *Lovely Live and the like!*”

Even though he was a shut-in and MMORPG addict, Diablo wasn’t an idol otaku.

That said, one had to keep up with the fads. To remain successful, *Cross Reverie* inevitably had to run collaboration events. These events, or “collabs” for short, were tie-in projects with other franchises where characters or items from other games were officially introduced into *Cross Reverie*.

Right around the time he made his dungeon, there was a collab with a social game called *Sister Carnival*, or *SisCarn* for short. Since *Cross Reverie* and *SisCarn* were both made by the same developer, it ended up being a fairly important event, with exclusive equipment and items you could only get during that collab.

The trick was that you had to make an account in *SisCarn* and get a few hours of progress in it to advance the scenario in *Cross Reverie*. So, naturally enough, Diablo had played *SisCarn*.

It had a somewhat ridiculous setting where “all the idols in the agency are the player’s little sisters.” And still, he had played it long enough to remember the main heroines’ names.

All that may be unrelated to the fact that this floor’s setting was similar to *SisCarn*.

They opened the door...

“What...?” Rem narrowed her eyes.

A white room. No matter where you looked, white was all you could see.

“Huh? Isn’t this snow!?” Shera raised her voice, her breath coming out in white puffs.

“I-It’s true, this is snow... Unbelievable. Even though there’s lava on the floor above us...” Lumachina looked surprised as she knelt down to scoop up some snow.

“Speaking of, isn’t it kinda c-c-cold?” asked Horn.

He had fainted from heatstroke earlier, but came to his senses thanks to Lumachina’s miracles. Having a high level Healer with them was really convenient.

“Achoo!” Horn sneezed loudly. “Sure is cold here...”

“...Let’s press forward,” Rem said. She tried to feign calmness, but there was a shiver to her voice.

“Brrr, it’s soooo cooold!” Shera whined loudly.

“You should probably know, the monsters on this floor are all fairly high leveled,” Diablo said with a shrug.

“Eeehhh!?” Shera covered her mouth with both her hands in a panic. It would have probably been too late to worry about that, but the monsters wouldn’t attack them here.

“...I think I can hear something.” Rem’s cat ears were twitching.

Music was playing from within the dungeon.

It was a poppy, up-tempo idol song, and with vocals, at that. It was *SisCarn*’s theme music, which was implemented into the game as a BGM during the collab, and had received a great deal of passionate support from some of the players. That song was playing, right now, in the dungeon.

And, dancing to the song’s beat—

“Huh, what’s that?” Shera exclaimed. “The monsters are...dancing?” Her eyes widened in amazement.

They were giant-type monsters covered in fuzzy fur: 《White Jaggers》, a stronger version of the 《Yeti》. There were thirty of them forming a ring on the narrow passageway, dancing in circles to the beat of the music.

Despite how silly they may have appeared, they were level 93 monsters. On top of having high HP, they were impervious to damage from normal weapons and had high magic resistance. If Diablo was in top condition, they wouldn’t be much of an issue, but he was low on HP, MP, and recovery potions at the moment. Frankly, he preferred to avoid combat here if possible.

“...Judging from the other floors, this level isn’t as straightforward as just beating the monsters, is it?” Rem asked.

“So you noticed.”

Diablo knew, of course, and could have explained straight away. But as the creator of the dungeon, he was curious to see if the others would figure out his design.

“...There are some missing spaces in the circle.”

“Hm.”

“...And we’re supposed to pass through them? No... Why would they be dancing, then?”

“Hmhm.”

“...Are we supposed to join the monsters’ ring and dance with them?”

“Ah, you figured it out faster than I had thought.”

Rem’s expression took on an exasperated shade. “Whoever made this dungeon may have god-like powers, but their way of thinking is astoundingly childish. What is the point to this buffoonery?”

“Ack!?”

Her words rammed into Diablo, inflicting psychological damage.

“This’ll be fun, though. I like it! I think dancing and singing are much more fun than swords and magic,” Shera said with a giggle.

“...When we make it back to town, go retract your Adventurer’s license and work as a dancer instead.”

“I don’t wanna...”

Lumachina nodded. “I prefer this sort of trick to combat, as well. We’re less likely to get hurt, no?”

“I wouldn’t be that optimistic!” Horn shook his head, pointing to the monsters. “Those guys are super strong! White Jeagers live in the northern mountains, but I hear they’re incredibly savage creatures that destroyed one of the northern countries! If they attack us, we’ll be d-d-d-doomed!”

“...They’ll probably attack us if we get the dance wrong.” Rem nodded solemnly.

“Did something happen?” Shera suddenly turned her gaze to Diablo and tilted her head curiously. “You look like you’re having fun.”

Diablo quickly stiffened his expression, panicking internally. Seeing others solve his puzzle was so fun he’d smiled without noticing.

“Pay it no mind. The trick to this level is as you’ve surmised. Let’s go; you will all have to memorize the dance. The rhythm repeats for a while, but stay alert for when the beat changes.”

“Y-Yes! I’ll do my best.” Rem nodded with a severe expression.

“Yay! This is gonna be fun!” Shera raised both her hands in the air.

“Please watch over us, my Lord...” Lumachina made the holy sign in front of her chest.

“Hehe, I’m good when it comes to memorizing things! I’m a Seeker, after all!” Horn proclaimed confidently.

Diablo began directing them, clapping all the while.

“One-two, one-two, turn right! Step, step, jump! Yes, that’s good. Don’t forget to smile, Rem!”

“Y-Yes, Diablo!”

“I’m the ‘Producer’ now! Call me as such.”

“H-Huh? Y-Yes, P-Pro... Producer?”

“You’re falling behind, Horn! Watch your stride when you step!”

“Right, Boss!”

Rem had no experience when it came to dancing, but her athletic abilities were superb, and she was bright, too, so she got the hang of it rather easily.

Shera loved singing and dancing, so she memorized it quickly enough. She was already singing as she danced, and was good enough at it to put actual idols to shame.

Lumachina should have been struggling given her physical condition, but since the High Priest's rituals included some dancing, her performance had a sublime, solemn touch to it.

Horn's youthful appearance made it seem like he was more of a child playing than dancing...but his movements weren't wrong.

"Good." Diablo gave a strong nod.

"Ah... Ah... Is it finally time, Producer?"

"Indeed! It's time for the real thing. A live performance! Dazzle this monstrous audience with your sincere dancing!"

"Yes!" the four of them said in unison, with Horn adding a "Boss" at the end.

Once the song had stopped to loop, they all jumped into the ring, the five of them occupying empty spots in the circle. The White Jeagers' gazes all locked on them, as if to ask, "The hell are these doofuses?"

But the monsters weren't attacking them, just observing them cautiously.

The song's intro started once more, and the curtain rose on their now live performance.

Shera's singing voice resounded across the ring. It mingled with the idols' vocals, never missing a beat and certainly not being outdone.

Then came the first pose.

They raised one hand, and took a step to the right. A clockwise turn. Turn to the left, legs forward then back, forward then back, one-two.

In the game, it was a combination of pose commands and movement controls, but here, you actually had to dance. Thanks to his body's athletic ability, Diablo was able to keep up, but the movements were fairly complicated.

Lumachina, who was far from being in peak condition, was out of breath; but they couldn't help her. Rem looked at her with concern, but she replied with a smile, as if to say, "I'll be all right!"

Shera's singing spread more clearly across the room, as if to spur her two friends on. As her singing resonated, her dancing became even more graceful. She was far better than when they had trained, so much so Diablo got goosebumps just looking at her.

The White Jeagers' eyes were all fixed on Shera.

Taking after Shera, Rem's and Lumachina's dancing had also dramatically improved; they were getting into the swing of things. Diablo and Horn could barely keep up with them.

The dance was rapidly reaching its finale. By this point, they weren't so much dancing in a ring anymore. Shera, Rem, and Lumachina were the main attraction, with everyone else being their backup dancers.

As they were approaching the final key change, Diablo found himself mesmerized by the girls.

The song was ending. Shera froze, her body in a finishing pose, as if a spotlight was shining down on her.



Rem and Lumachina were breathing heavily.

“Ah...hah, hah... S-Stupid Shera... What did you...get so excited for...”

“Teehee, wasn’t it fun, though?”

“Ah...hah... Heh... It was...awful...but...it was fun, too. I never...thought dancing...was so much fun...before...”

Lumachina hugged Shera.

“Ooooooooooooooooooh!!!”

Suddenly, the White Jeagers began roaring. They shouldn’t have reacted in any way if you got the dance right, though.

—*Did we mess up somewhere!?*

“...core! ...core! ...core!”

They seemed to be repeating something. Diablo strained his ears to listen more carefully.

“Encore! Encore! Encore!”

He couldn’t believe his ears; the monsters were...demanding an encore...? Some of them were even wiping tears from their eyes.

If they were to perform again, it would only bring them back to where they started, and they couldn’t afford that. They wanted to end it here, but—

The White Jeagers glared at a part of the ring.

Horn had fallen on the ground.

“I-I was... I couldn’t take my eyes off Shera...”

Apparently, he’d missed the last step and bumped into a White Jeager that was standing next to him.

The monsters’ hate was all fixed on Horn, but they couldn’t leave him behind...

Diablo pulled Tenma’s Staff from his pouch.

“Horn, run! 《Cross Blizzard》!!!”

It was a level 110 water and wind element spell. Two tornadoes would appear, freezing anything they came in contact with, and shattered what was frozen with gales of wind.

The White Jeagers became statues of ice and shattered—or at least they should have. What shattered was only a layer of fur, while their bodies hadn’t taken any significant damage. The most the spell had done was slow them down, and temporarily hide the party from their eyes.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!” Horn scuttered between the monsters, worming his way between their massive frames.

“Hurry!” Diablo pointed to the exit.

“H-Hurry up!” Shera waved, beckoning him.

“It’s...heavy...” Rem pulled the iron door open with all her might,

pushing Lumachina, who could only wait anxiously, to the other side.

“Hya!?”

“Shera, you go on, too!”

“R-Right!”

Horn had finally reached the exit, fumbling over himself the whole time, and crossed the door to the staircase.

“Diabloooo!” Rem cried out.

“Hm!”

Just as they were about to pull him through, something smashed against his back.

—*Oh cra...!*

His head caught up to the situation at hand, but his body was too sluggish to react. Maybe it was the fatigue he’d built up from going from the scathing heat to the freezing cold, but he just couldn’t avoid it.

Something had impacted against his back and sent him tumbling down.

That thing was a snowball, one that looked like it was made from lumps of ice pressed together.

The damage reduction from his cape was in effect, but the snowball had still hit for enough damage that he couldn’t simply ignore it.

They were level 93 monsters, all right.

Taking damage from a snowball? Really!?

He was having trouble breathing since the ball had hit him in the back. But he couldn’t afford to stay put as more snowballs were flying his way. He had to avoid them somehow, but the White Jeagers weren’t going to allow him to get back to the door. Their constant barrage blocked his path to the exit as the monsters closed in on him.

If a bunch of high level monsters were to gang up on him like this, there was actually a chance he’d die.

He could hear Rem screaming and calling his name from the exit. He merely let his lips curl up into a smirk.

“Time’s up.”

The song’s intro began playing again.

The White Jeagers’ attack stopped as they returned to their spots rather excitedly, once again forming a ring.

Diablo swiftly headed to the door, reuniting with his companions. And so, the next song had begun...

†

The sixth level—

“Seeking a meal in a dungeon...”

This level was a forest thick with vegetation. At the very least, it

wasn't particularly hot or cold. There was also a river with a calm stream, which Diablo and his group used to refill their canteens.

"I'm sorry..." Horn looked crestfallen. "I was just so impressed that my step wasn't wide enough... N-Next time! I'll get it next time, Producer-Boss!"

—*We've already moved on from that!*

Diablo shrugged. "Pay it no mind."

"I promise I'll be super helpful!"

"...You really don't have to try so hard." Rem sighed lightly. "Just don't get us in trouble."

Her words of consolation cut deeper than knives, sharply and bitterly.

"It's all right, no worries. We're all fine and that's what matters. I'm sure we'll make it out no matter what happens," Shera said, smiling.

Her attempts at encouragement were as unfounded as ever.

Lumachina nodded in agreement. "We only made it this far with all your help, Horn. Do not be discouraged."

"R-Right! No matter what monster comes our way next, I'll thrash it!" Horn said with more enthusiasm than ever before.

"Well, there's your monster." Diablo pointed ahead.

A giant crab, roughly thirty meters in height, stood guard before the door.

The 《Grand Cancer》 was a level 99 monster that ranked as top class when it came to sturdiness and defense, with pincers strong enough to cut a knight's armor in half. It was also surprisingly nimble with its eight legs, and had a frothy breath attack capable of poisoning. It was an aquatic monster, but was actually more dangerous on land.

Horn was about to charge at the monster, but Diablo caught him by the collar.

"You'll die."

"That's so haaarsh!?"

His dagger was an N rank weapon with no enchantments applied to it; it was effectively scrap metal. It wouldn't do a single point of damage to the Grand Cancer, and even if Horn was agile for someone who was level 20, he still wouldn't be fast enough to dodge a level 99 monster's attack. His charge would only end with him doing no damage, then getting sliced in half by the crab's pincers.

As they were squabbling, the monster, which would normally be incapable of speech, began talking:

“Offer me tribute, puny ones!”

“I-I think the crab just spoke!” Shera said, her eyes wide with shock.

“...It’s probably one of the dungeon’s challenges, same as the riddles.” Rem shook her head. “I can’t say I appreciate the condescending attitude, but... What did it mean by ‘tribute’?”

“Offer me tribute of a succulent herb-grilled chicken and fragrant seven-herb soup!”

“...That’s awfully specific,” Rem, said, narrowing her eyes. Shera tilted her head. “It’s like it’s making an order in a restaurant...”

“And it ordered a drink, too.”

It acted like it was ordering at a diner.

“So, in other words, we’ll be cooking this time?” Lumachina brought her hands together.

“...It would seem so. It’s as absurd a puzzle as ever, but I suppose it is preferable to having to fight,” Rem said, surveying their surroundings.

The rock bed making up the ceiling was luminescent, brightening up the area as if the sun was shining down on it. All around them was a forest, and they could make out the burbling sounds of the river and the chirping of birds from the distance.

“...I assume we are supposed to cook using this.”

A metal container was set atop a smooth rock, and beside it were plates and a frying pan.

“I’m getting kinda hungry, now that you mention it...” Shera rubbed her belly sullenly.

“...Taking a rest here may be a good idea. Starving to death will do us no good after all.”

“I agree.” Lumachina nodded. “God has told me we are not to die here.”

“Cooking, huh! Let me handle the tools!” Horn clenched his fists enthusiastically.

With that setup, it became obvious this was a level where they had to prepare the food the crab had ordered. If they succeeded, the Grand Cancer would get out of their way and permit them to pass on to the next level.

“It ordered two things,” Rem said, holding up two fingers, “grilled

chicken and soup... But I wonder what it meant by ‘herb-grilled’ and ‘seven-herb’?” She glanced at Diablo.

—*Maybe these dishes don’t exist in this world?*

“An herb-grilled chicken is a roasted chicken sprinkled with herbs. The ‘seven-herb’ refers to a group of herbs called the ‘herbs of spring.’ You can consider all the ‘herbs’ you find on this floor to belong to this category.”

“...I see. So we’re to pick herbs from this forest and prepare the soup at the same time. Which reminds me...how high are your cooking skills?”

This was technically the first time he had to cook. They had made some day trips around Faltra before, but the trips were short enough that they could make do with food they carried in their bags. They always used the eateries around the 《Peace of Mind Inn》 when big mealtimes came around. And when they slept outdoors, all they did was roast beef jerky and sweet potatoes.

“...I’ll admit I’m not very good when it comes to cooking,” Rem explained regarding the extent of her own skills. “I prefer to eat meat raw.”

“Doesn’t that make your belly hurt?” Shera asked, surprised.

“A Pantherian would never get a stomach ache from eating raw meat.” Rem puffed up with pride.

“Really!?” Shera exclaimed.

Pantherians were seemingly more wild than Diablo had thought.

“I’m really good at picking berries!” Shera raised both her hands in the air.

Elves lived in abundant forests blessed by the gods, which were said to provide them with fruits and berries in times of need.

—*No point in expecting any cooking skills from her, either.*

A brilliant smile played over Lumachina’s lips. A girl as knowledgeable and devoted as her would no doubt be very dependable in this situation.

“Doesn’t food just appear when you pray to God?”

—*Oh, right...*

Lumachina was a bona fide, sheltered princess. The High Priest had just spent all her time in a sanctum. In all the adventures up to this point, they had been eating preserved food, so Diablo couldn’t tell, but...apparently Lumachina had zero skills when it came to household tasks.

“She’s more useless than I thought...” Diablo whispered under his breath.

“...Useless, indeed.”

“You’re pretty useless, aren’t you!?”

“Wha!?” Lumachina seemed uncharacteristically heartbroken.

“You can leave the cooking to me, a-yup!” Horn raised his hand in a salute.

“Oh?”

He seemed surprisingly dependable for once. But given everything that happened, Rem eyed him suspiciously.

“...You’re saying you’re good at cooking? Then have you ever made an herb-grilled chicken or seven-herb soup?”

“I-I haven’t, but I know how to grill stuff! Anything’s tasty once you grill it!”

“...I remember now. You did say something about roasting everything on a skewer... Rejected. Go stoke the fire or something.”

“Mmmgh,” Horn grumbled with disappointment.

“Heehee, then can I count on you to prepare the stove?” Shera asked, placing a hand on Horn’s shoulder. “Rem and I will collect those seven-herbs.”

“S-Sure thing! You can count on me!” Horn beat his own chest in a reassuring gesture.

“Hmm, what should I do, then?” Lumachina tilted her head quizzically.

“...You could pray... Or, no, you can be in charge of washing the pot and dishes.”

“All right! I will do my best!” Lumachina smiled, pleased to have gotten a role. “I shall go gather some water, OK?”

Even though Lumachina’s life was on the line, Rem and Shera were still very assertive.

“...Let’s go, then, Diablo,” Rem said.

“Huh?” He uttered in his natural voice without noticing.

Looking at the girls as they had talked, he reverted back to his “my classmates are all caught up in their discussion and I can’t find a way to get involved” mode.

Old habits certainly died hard...

“R-Right, you may speak.” Diablo corrected himself, this time in a tone more worthy of a Demon Lord.

Rem tilted her head, puzzled, but carried on regardless.

“We do not know what the seven herbs look like. You will have to tell us which ones are right, and we shall pick those.”

“That is fine.”

He had only ever seen them as icons and graphics, so he wasn’t sure he could recognize them growing in a forest. While he didn’t have much confidence, he still had to try.

In *Cross Reverie*, Diablo had never acquired the 《Chef》 subclass. He couldn’t expect to pull the same sort of impressive stunts he did when combining items for potions. Plus, his real self was the type who would probably say, “Cooking? I can heat up a TV dinner, where’s the

microwave?”

—*Work, memory, work! I gotta remember what those items looked like!*

You couldn't usually find them all in the same place, but this forest should have had all seven herbs in it.

Between tufts of suspicious red and blue plants, they were able to find a green herb.

“That's one of them, a Shepherd's Purse. Or wait, maybe it's a Nipplewort? Either way, that's one of the seven herbs.”

“Understood.” Rem picked the thick leaves from the ground.

“Look, look, Diablo! I found some basil!”

“Good.”

He had never actually seen it before, but in the game it was just described as a “fresh herb.” They would need it to make the requested “succulent herb-grilled chicken.”

When he made the dungeon, he set it so the ingredient gathering would be easy. Thanks to that, finding all the herbs they needed was simple enough.

“...That should do for the seven herbs,” Rem said, counting the herbs they had collected. “We just need to get the chicken meat now.”

“What should we do?” Shera asked.

“...How about you donate your Summon?”

“Y-You can't eat my 《Turkey Shot》!”

“...I was only joking. If we were to try cooking it, it would just turn back into a cryst—ah! Shera, look at that!”

The moment Rem pointed her finger, Shera's bow was already drawn and nocked. They had spotted a plump, round chicken between the vegetation; one that fat could definitely produce enough meat for a small group.

But there was a problem...

“Don't, you'll petrify it!” Diablo called out.

“Right!”

Shera's jet black bow was enchanted by the Demon Lord Krebskulm, and would inflict 《Petrification》 on any target it damaged. The duration of the effect was unknown.

Shera shot an arrow.

—*If she hits the chicken and it turns to stone, wouldn't it all be pointless!?*

Or so Diablo thought—Shera's arrow struck a branch that was directly above the chicken, making it fall down. The petrified branch crashed on the chicken's head, and with a high pitched “Squawk!!!”, the bird lost consciousness.

Rem sighed. “Well done.”

“I did it!”

“...Truly the work of a high-level Archer.”

“I’m a Summoner!” Shera sulked, her lips forming a grumpy, horizontal line.

But even Diablo had to acknowledge she was a superb Archer, one that would make for a reliable rearguard attacker.

Rem began skillfully skinning the chicken, and after cutting it to pieces, stuck a fork in it.

“What are you doing?” Shera asked with a tilt of the head.

“...This should make the meat softer. The crab ordered a ‘succulent’ chicken, after all.”

“Oh, I see, I see.”

“...Personally I think it’s tasty as is...speaking from personal preference,” Rem said, picking up the meat with a hint of disappointment.

Diablo rubbed salt and pepper on both sides of the meat. He figured making it salty would go over well, given how much they had sweat earlier.

The Grand Cancer had ordered the food, but they decided to make some for themselves, too. Unlike the game, in this world you could go hungry, and wouldn’t be able to move without food.

He smeared the herbs Shera had found into the skin, and pressed them in with his hands. The skin had been cut so he could stuff the chicken easily.

“You’re familiar with cooking, Diablo?” Rem asked, visibly impressed.

“I read about it in a mang—uhhh, i-it’s because I’m a Demon Lord! Obviously!”

“I...see... You’re very knowledgeable about many things. I wish I could broaden my horizons like that, as well.”

It just so happened to be a dish that had appeared in a manga he was reading around the time he made the dungeon. Regardless, it was still the first time he had actually made it.

Frying it in the pan was the hard part.

Twigs stoked the fire below the stove that Horn had prepared, and the fire wasn’t as stable as what you’d get from a gas burner.

They started by roasting the side garnished with the herbs, making sure to lift it every once in a while so it wouldn’t burn. If the fire was too strong, it would burn the food, and the heat wouldn’t make it all the way into the meat. But if they kept the fire too low, it would take much longer to cook and the meat would go hard. Making sure the heat reached the frying pan in just the right way was hard work.

Having fried the skin side, they flipped the meat to fry the other side, as well. The scent of herbs filled their nostrils, and they could even see Horn's mouth watering over how tasty it looked.

"Amazing! This is great!"

"How's the soup coming?"

Lumachina was just about to take a sip to test it. "The seasoning is perfect. I think a fish bouillon would be tastier, but still."

"If it's ready, then that's good enough."

They laid down the plates. After Lumachina gave thanks to God for the meal, it was time to eat.

"It's so goooood!!!" Horn cried out in joy.

"It really is delicious," Lumachina said, elegantly cutting the herb-grilled chicken and carrying it to her mouth in small, neat pieces. Her expression brightened with every bite she took.

"...Just calling this a delicacy wouldn't do it justice." Rem was munching on her own medium-rare portion, without cutting it into pieces.

"It's super yummy! I think this is the yummiest meat I've ever had!" Even Shera, who preferred vegetables to meat, was praising it.

Diablo took a bite. The scent of the herbs and the meat's juiciness were impeccable. The chicken meat filled his mouth with a delicious flavor as he chewed it.

"Good..."

Feigning calmness, he whispered this one word, but in his mind, he was applauding.

—Hm. We just made it for the first time, but I feel like next time we can make it even better. If we make it under a stove with a stable fire, we could fry it more easily and make it more fragrant.

There was no status screen in this world, but if this was like *Cross Reverie*, would Diablo have gotten to level 1 in the Chef subclass? It certainly felt like he did.

"Compared to the herb-grilled chicken, the soup would probably be disappointing," Lumachina said, a bit dejectedly.

"Ahaha, it's still tasty, but yeah," Shera agreed.

Lumachina had no skill in cooking whatsoever, but despite having lived in luxury until now, she was a good judge of flavor.

"The seven herbs and the seasoning are just right, but...there is something missing. I guess a meat or fish bouillon really would be tastier... Soup is just no match for it."

"I think it could use some tender garnish to it?" Shera was also quite the connoisseur, oddly enough, given how much of a glutton she was.

Diablo tasted the soup as well. "Hm...? It's not bad, but it's

missing a little...flavor.”

“But if you added the chicken to it, its flavor would overtake the soup.”

“I think it’s tasty...?” Horn, who didn’t have much of a sense for matters involving taste, didn’t seem to mind.

Rem, with her sensitive cat tongue, blew on the soup to cool it down.

—*That missing...flavor...*

“Offer me tribute, puny ones!”

The Grand Crab cried out again, still stationed before the gate.

That’s right, they had forgotten the crab was the one that ordered the food.

“That missing flavor...” Diablo whispered under his breath.

Ten minutes later—

“My, how delicious! I cannot say I have ever had soup this good!” Lumachina exclaimed happily.

“It’s so yummy! Isn’t this great!?” Shera looked pleased, too.

“S’Amazing!” Horn was shedding tears of gratitude and joy. “My cheeks won’t stop shaking... So this is what it’s like when something’s so tasty it melts in your mouth!”

“...Tastee...” Rem slurred, apparently regressing back to an infant.

“Yes, it is as I thought—nothing beats crab stew!”

†

Three days since entering the dungeon—

Diablo’s group had reached the ninth level, which had a “Caution Overhead” in the entrance.

In the game, a player could get through the whole thirteen floors in an hour and a half. Here, on top of getting through each level, descending the staircases also cost them precious time on top of traversing through each individual level.

And by now, the seventh mark had surfaced on Lumachina’s body; only two remained.

There were no puzzles on the thirteenth floor, so only four levels remained. By Diablo’s calculations, they should be able to finish the dungeon within the day.

“...I think I can hear the sound of a river.” Rem’s feline ears twitched. “A big one, at that.”

“It smells like there’s water nearby, doesn’t it?” Shera said, sniffing the air.

Diablo nodded. “To get through this level, we’ll have to travel

across a narrow path on the cliffside. Flying monsters will attack us as we go.”

The idea was that adventurers wouldn’t expect flying monsters in a dungeon and would be ill-prepared to deal with them, resulting in a grueling battle. But that shouldn’t be an issue with this party. Diablo alone had enough firepower to take out airborne enemies, and Shera could use her bow. Even if they were to take some damage, Lumachina was there to heal them, as well.

They once again assumed the formation of Diablo, Rem, Lumachina, Horn, Shera. That way, the two anti-air fighters were in the front and rear of the row, defending the middle.

“Watch your step,” Diablo warned the group.

A muddy stream surged violently below the cliff, the roaring of the water echoing in their ears. In the game, falling into the water and getting swept away would just take you back to the start of the first floor, but Diablo was well aware of how ruthless this world could be when it came to matters of distance. If they were to fall in with armor on, there was a good chance they would drown to death.

“You should be especially cautious, Horn.”

“You got it, Boss!”

Just as Diablo had designed it, there was a road wide enough for only one person to walk on along the cliff; and despite there being a cliff, it was still inside the dungeon. The mountain was within a spacious hollow, the narrow path running against the wall, with a deposit of underground water running beneath the cavern.

As they began crossing, the flying monsters soared their way, having spotted them.

“Whoa, they’re coming!” Shera raised a small shout.

She fired an arrow; her skill was certainly considerable, and the bow was enchanted with powerful magic. Just a single graze from her arrows petrified the monsters. Shera alone could have probably handled the whole wave alone.

He’d wanted to preserve his MP, but to stay on the safe side, Diablo attacked as well. He pointed Tenma’s staff overhead.

“《Lightning Arrow》!”

A light elemental spell that fired shining bullets, it was the higher-ranked version of 《Beat Arrow》. The arrows penetrated their targets easily.

The assaulting monsters strength and attack patterns were just as he had remembered setting them. Everything was going smoothly...
..or, it should have.

A winged snake, a monster Diablo had never seen before, swept

down on them from above.

—*Wait, no... I remember this monster. Isn't this a Summon!?*

Indeed, it was a Summon called 《Flying Worm》.

“Diablo! There’s a Summoner on this floor!” Rem cried out.

“So it seems!”

If they defeated the summoner, the summon would disappear. But even then, they couldn’t ignore the one right in front of them.

Diablo pointed Tenma’s staff at the beast.

“Explosion!”

A puff of black smoke enveloped it. But at that moment—

A 《Trap Worm》 burst out of the narrow path, dividing the group in two.

“Get away!” Rem had noticed it at the nick of time, pushing Lumachina away.

“Kya!?” Lumachina managed to just barely stay balanced.

—*This Summon again!? Don't tell me it's the Paladin from back then!*

Having escaped the worm’s attack, the party was divided by the now ruined path. On one side were Diablo and Rem, and on the other side were Lumachina, Shera, and Horn.

The opponent wouldn’t let this opportunity go.

“Ohohohohoh! I got you now!”

A man clad in azure armor appeared from the hole the worm had burrowed, his sword drawn and at the ready.

“Gewalt!?” Lumachina cried out.

He was the Paladin who tried to kill Lumachina near Faltra. To think he would chase her all the way out here!

The place he had appeared was too close to Lumachina, taking away any chance Diablo had to cast his magic. Diablo had a plethora of methods to defend himself, but no spells that would help him protect his party.

Rem, who was adept at close quarters combat, was on Diablo’s side, and Shera had only just finished shooting down the other airborne monsters.

“Die in the name of my generous reward!” Gewalt swung down his longsword at Lumachina.

“Ahhh!” Lumachina stiffened in terror.

“I won’t let you!”

Horn jumped in, pushing Lumachina aside. Had Horn tried to brandish his cheap dagger against a high level warrior like Gewalt, the Paladin would have cut him down along with his dainty weapon.

Perhaps knowing this, Horn had thrown himself against one of Gewalt’s legs. Normally, all he would have done was make the Paladin

lose his balance, but they were on a narrow path, and the Trap Worm's burrowing had rendered it to be even smaller.

"Whaaa!?" The Paladin's leg slipped off the path. "What are you doing, you little shit!?" Gewalt thrust his sword toward Horn.

A splatter of blood flew into the cold air.

"Agh!?" A small scream escaping his lips, Horn fell down into the pit.

Diablo kicked the ground, jumping into the air after him.

"Rem, keep going!" he called out, with no time to even confirm if his words had gotten through to her.

With the howl of the wind whistling in his ears, he rapidly approached the violent stream.

"Diablo! Diablooo!"

He could hear Rem's sorrowful wailing.

Gewalt was the first to fall into the river, Horn hitting the water with a splash immediately after him. Then Diablo had fallen in, washing away in the stream.

"Ugh!?" Even his strong, high-level body could do nothing to oppose the water's force, since he had no footing to brace himself.

He dove underwater, judging it to be somewhat safer compared to the gushing water's surface.

Looking further into the stream...

—*There he is!*

Horn was sinking, weighed down by his armor.

The paladin, with his steel armor, should have been suffering the same fate, but there was no sight of him. Maybe he was further down the stream.

Diablo didn't have the leisure to look for Gewalt at the moment, though. Instead, he swam after Horn. If it was his real body, he never would have been able to swim through such a rapid current, but Diablo had no doubt in his heart that he could save him as he was now. This was because, in *Cross Reverie*, Diablo had learned the 《Underwater Action》 skill.

—*Don't think about the how! The less I think about it, the more I'll be able to use my in-game abilities! I have to believe in myself... No, I have to believe in Diablo! I'll catch up to Horn, no matter what!*

He reached out to Horn, closing the distance. He had no idea how he was swimming like this, and yet...

Diablo firmly grasped Horn's hand.

Chapter 4: Saving One's Companions

Even Diablo, who made the dungeon, didn't know where the river that flowed across the level would lead. All he did was configure a 《Waterway》 into the dungeon's scenery; where the water came from or where it went weren't questions he would concern himself with.

He wouldn't be surprised if the stream was actually conjured by magic, and disappeared at the edge of the cave.

But the canal's water was real, and the water had flowed all the way to the edge of the level.

—*A waterfall!?*

He fell along with the water, a fall so high he doubted he would survive if there were rocks beneath them. If they got separated again, he would probably never find Horn again.

With that in mind, Diablo cradled the little Grasswalker in his arms. There was no time to put Tenma's Staff in his pouch, so he let go of it, relinquishing it to the gushing stream.

Then, all sense of balance abandoned Diablo. He rotated and spun in the water, unable to distinguish if he was facing up or down.

—*I'm gonna drown!*

Anxiety and panic threatened to overcome his mind, but his Underwater Action skill kicked in with full effect. Steadying his breathing, he regained his center of gravity. Still holding Horn in his arms, Diablo kicked against the water, swimming back up to the surface.

“Aaah!” he gasped as his head broke the surface.

They were in the waterfall's plunge basin. Located in the depths of the spacious cavern, it was roughly the shape of a flask, giving Diablo the impression he was submerged in the water at the bottom of a cup or a bowl.

The stream had grown calmer here.

Putting his Underwater Action skill into effect once more, he swam to the edge of the basin, putting Horn over the rocks before climbing out himself.

“Horn, do you still live?”

Horn, lying on the dry rocks, gave no response. He had probably vomited along the way, because water was leaking from his mouth.

“Horn, answer me!” Diablo called out again.

He tried to feign calmness, but could feel his pulse hastening by the second. A bad feeling was grabbing hold of his heart. He placed a hand over Horn's small lips—and could feel breathing.

“Alive... You're alive!”

But he was still unconscious.

—*What about his pulse?*

He checked Horn's wrist, but was too panicked to really tell. After a few more attempts, he confirmed Horn still had a pulse.

—*His heart's still working! He's alive!*

Horn was a level 20 adventurer and, holding true to that title, was a durable fighter. Being a lightweight Grasswalker also served to save his life. It appeared he merely passed out from the shock for now.

“Oh, thank God...”

Relief washed over Diablo. With Horn out cold, and there being no one else around, Diablo had spoken in his natural voice. He also found himself laughing out of relief.

He then went on to inspect Horn's shoulder, which had been stabbed by Gewalt.

“Hmm... He's still bleeding, but the wound is shallow. I think it'll close on its own if I leave him as is.”

Having an HP Potion would be handy right about now, but Diablo had to use them all before entering the dungeon. Diablo's Distorted Crown had an HP regenerating effect, but could only be equipped by level 140 or higher characters, so he couldn't lend it to Horn.

Suddenly, he sneezed.

“Crap, it's so cold... This is bad... I'm fine because I have the 《Curtain of Dark Clouds》, but...”

His cloak protected him from all status ailments, so Diablo wouldn't even catch a cold from this. But Horn would be at risk like this.

Something he had read once on the internet came to mind:

—*When a human's rectal temperature drops below 35 degrees Celsius, they go into hypothermia, and staying in that state for too long can be lethal. Going to sleep in the summer wearing damp clothes can lower your body temperature to the risk of death, too.*

“Right, I'm gonna have to tend to his wound, so I may as well take his clothes off... Gotta light a fire, too. Is there anything I can burn...?”

Looking around, all he could see were rocks, rocks and even more rocks. Some luminous moss was growing on these rocks where the water had come in contact with them. Thanks to that, it wasn't dark, but they wouldn't burn and couldn't help him in starting a fire. He could produce fire with his magic, but without anything flammable to fuel it, it wouldn't last.

Ever since his group entered the dungeon, he'd been spending

more and more MP. There was hardly any time for breaks, and he was in dire need of recovery. He felt that if he let his focus waver even a bit, he'd fall asleep next to Horn.

—*Damn, all my motivation's gone...*

Everything felt like a huge, tiresome slog.

"Ah, maybe I can just take a little nap..."

But if Diablo didn't act now, Horn would die right before his eyes.

"No, hell no! I'm not letting that happen! I may be a shitty person, but...I can't just let him die..."

He sighed despondently, trying to find something he could use as fuel.

"Damn it... Guess this is all I have."

Diablo took off his Curtain of Dark Clouds. This had kept him safe from status ailments and protected him from dying in one hit; an SSR-class item, enhanced to the highest level. A player could enhance a piece of equipment up to seven levels, and an item that was enhanced so many times was considered "EX Rank," or a "Sevenfold." Diablo held such an item in his very hands.

"Not gonna lie...I was pretty attached to you... No way around it, though..."

As precious as it was to him, it wasn't worth more than someone's life.

"《Fire》," Diablo whispered softly.

Naturally, once he had taken it off, the equipment would no longer grant Diablo its enchanted effects. As it was right now, the Curtain of Dark Clouds was nothing more than a wet cloak.

Scorched by magical flames, the dry parts of the cloak caught fire.

"Aaah... It's warm."

He then took off his outfit, the 《Ebony Abyss》. Keeping these wet clothes on put him at risk of hypothermia, and the cloak alone wasn't enough to sufficiently stoke the fire.

The Ebony Abyss had a damage reduction effect, and had increased many of his base stats.

He did keep his pants on, though. Being butt naked when he regrouped with Rem and the others sounded like a bad idea. It definitely wouldn't fit well with his Demon Lord role play.

"Right, still not enough... I'll have to use your gear, too, OK, Horn?"

It was uncomfortable, having to take off someone else's clothes.

"We're both guys, so give me a break, all right?"

Imagining Horn's protests after coming to made Diablo hesitate, but...he figured he'd rely on his Demon Lord role play to talk his way out of it, and began undressing Horn.

He started with Horn's cape, a normal cloak with no

enchancements to its name. It was pretty old and worn out, too. He hoped it didn't carry too much sentimental value for Horn, but it shouldn't be worth more than Horn's own life... At least, he hoped so.

Diablo then removed the pouch belt on Horn's waist, his bracers, then his greaves. Diablo couldn't tell from the graphics in the game, but apparently on the other side there were pieces that acted as leather belts and a hook used to fasten them on. Rem had similar armor, and having seen her remove it once, Diablo had remembered how to take it off.

Diablo then began removing Horn's wet clothes. His body wasn't just lacking in muscle, there was an even a certain curvy roundness to his form.

"Man...you should work on your muscles, Horn. Even if you're a Grasswalker, you're still a Warrior-type, you know?"

After thoroughly wringing out his shirt, Diablo threw it into the fire.

He then pulled down Horn's pants. He used the tights for fuel, but burning Horn's pants and leaving Horn with nothing to wear felt all sorts of cruel, so for now he just left them out to dry. Leaving Horn naked in the cold wasn't good, but was still better than Horn sleeping with cold clothes on.

"Wait..."

His gaze was drawn to Horn's exposed abdomen. He made an effort not to look, but...

—*Huh?*

It wasn't there.

"Mmm...?" A moan escaped Horn's lips as he sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"Thank God, you're alive!" is what Diablo couldn't say, given...recent developments.

Horn was naked, with Diablo still gripping their pants in his hands. To top it off, what should have been part of Horn's crotch wasn't there... Which meant Horn wasn't a "he" but a...

—*Do Grasswalker males just not have them!?*

Diablo had never heard of anything like that.

He stiffened, feeling a cold sweat run down his spine. Horn, who had still be in a haze until now, finally realized the condition she was in.

"Wha!? Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Whaaat...!?" Horn stammered, gradually going red in the face.

Diablo stood up, Horn's pants still in his hands.

“Hmph! So you’ve finally come to your senses, you weakling!” he said in an overbearing, domineering fashion. “Display the utmost of gratitude to me, for your life has been saved by the Demon Lord Diablo’s pity! Make no mistake, for it was merely a whim on my part.”

“H-Huh!? What!?”

“The races are truly frail. If you were to sleep with these wet clothes on, you would surely die! That is why I am drying your clothes...like this!”

Diablo wrung Horn’s pants, making water drip from the fabric onto the floor. He then threw them into the fire. The cloth was old, but burned quite well.

—*Oh, crap! I just went and did it now! I only wanted to take them off, not burn the damn things!*

Stifling his inner turmoil, Diablo pressed on with his Demon Lord role play.

“Hmph! Surely you will not claim that your clothes are worth more than your life!?”

Overwhelmed by the situation, Horn fell silent, but eventually squeezed out a response.

“I-I won’t, say that... After all, staying alive is...important...”

“So long as you understand!”

—*Did I really manage to talk my way out of it!?*

“B-But ...I was just a little surprised...” Horn said, covering her extremely slender body with her arms.

—*That makes two of us!*

“Pay it no mind. I am a Demon Lord, after all. Such trifling details do not bother me.”

“Y... Yeah, that’s right. I bet it doesn’t matter to you if I’m a boy or a girl, Boss... Achoo!”

“Hm. It seems you are still cold. Come closer.”

Diablo sat next to the campfire. With the Curtain of Dark Clouds now gone, he could fall ill as well. He would have to be careful. He sacrificed his high rank equipment, not to mention Horn’s pants, to light this fire, so the least they could do was use it to keep warm.

“Hmm... Is that really all right...?” Horn went red up to her bunny ears.

“Do away with the modesty. Would I have dived into the river after you if I had no intent of saving you?”

“I-I guess not... Really, thank you... You saved me, Boss...”

Horn rose to her feet and drew closer. He figured she would sit away from him, so they would surround the campfire, but, instead, she squatted down, sitting right beside him.

—*Huh?*

He did tell her to “come closer” but never said to “come closer to the campfire.”

But, wouldn't you normally sit next to the fire?

—*If she's so embarrassed, why is she snuggling up to me like this? A-And n-n-naked, no less...*

It was Diablo that took her clothes off, and yet...

“Huddling together when it's cold makes it more warm, doesn't it, Boss? I used to do it all the time with my family...”

“I-Is that right?”

It seemed a bit wrong for a Demon Lord to lose his composure just because a Grasswalker, with a child's physique, snuggled up to him.

—*Wait, no. A Demon Lord wouldn't lose his composure no matter who it was. I have to stay on top of my game...*

Horn leaned against him. Her body was frigid against his skin.

“You're still pretty cold, aren't you?”

“Ah, was that not OK?” Horn tried to draw away, but Diablo grabbed and embraced her.

“Again, cease with the pointless modesty. If you catch cold, then I'd have started this campfire for nothing.”

—*I had to burn two pieces of EX rank equipment for that, you know? And your pants, too...*

Horn was small; her body was petite, even compared to other Grasswalkers, and she was soft, too, like a baby rabbit. She twisted in Diablo's arms, as if she was being tickled.

“It's so warm...”

“You would be in trouble if it wasn't.”

“Hehe...”

She was nervous at first, but eventually entrusted her weight to Diablo. Her small, bare back had pressed against his skin, the heat slowly returning to her ice-cold body. Diablo also felt his own body warming up.



“Whew...”

—*I guess we made it out alive, somehow...*

Horn covered Diablo’s hands, which sat on her shoulders, with her own.

“Daddy...” she whispered softly.

“What, did you just...?” Diablo stiffened, barely squeezing those words out.

Realizing a moment too late what she had just said, Horn rose to her feet in a panic.

“Ah, no! That was—uhhh, hmm! That was—respect! It means I respect you, as an adventurer! So it’s not what you think!” she hurriedly stammered out.

“I-I understand! It’s fine, I understand, so stop wasting your precious energy on this!” Diablo laid his hands on her shoulders, calming her down.

“Uuu...” Horn curled up, once again red all the way up to her fluffy ears.

Diablo could feel Horn’s heart beating faster through her skin. He fell silent, concentrating on that rhythmic throbbing.

But really, he was also terribly flustered.

—*D-D-Daddy!? When did I have time to get a kid!? No no no, she says it’s out of respect, as an adventurer...but would you call someone “daddy” out of that kind of respect!? No one’s ever called me that before! Did I do anything to make her trust me that much!? Maybe she just mistook me for someone else!*

But Grasswalker males, even if they were fathers, had the physical appearance of children. There was no way she’d mistake Diablo for another Grasswalker, not with his physique.

—*But maybe even Grasswalkers remembered their fathers’ hands to be large, from when they were babies? Or maybe she had some other meaning attached to the word “daddy”...? No, no way, that kind of culture doesn’t exist in this world...*

He felt like his brain was simmering from all the thoughts jumbling up inside his head.

Both of their faces going red, the two fell silent. Time slowly ticked by...

†

Having warmed up their bodies, they eventually decided it was time to move. Relying on the air currents for guidance, they went deeper into the dungeon. Wind blowing through the cave meant it

should be flowing out to an exit, so if nothing else, there shouldn't be a dead end.

—I can't believe I got stranded in my own dungeon...

Leaving the plunge pool behind, they found a hole leading further in. Diablo only had his pants on, as well as the pouch on his back. And while it probably wouldn't be of much help, he had the 《Prototype Great Scythe》 in hand.

The war scythe may have appeared strong and intimidating, but in practice it was terribly weak. It was the weapon he wielded when trying to hold back against an opponent.

Horn was practically naked, since all she had on her body were her pouch belt, bracers, and greaves. Being a Grasswalker, she had a childlike body regardless of her actual age, but... A girl with such a flat, curveless body, walking around with only scarce armor on, was definitely the sort of thing that only people of certain...inclinations, would find appealing. If only they still had her pants...

Wait, no, a girl would need a top, too.

A tall, half-naked man, walking around with a virtually naked pre-teen was the type of situation that would land him in a huge load of trouble.

—If I knew she was a girl in the first place, I wouldn't have had the guts to burn her clothes...

"Why did you dress like a male?" Diablo asked, unable to hold back the question any longer.

"That's, uh... " Horn twitched, her expression turning into a frightened one.

"You do not have to speak of it if you do not wish to."

Did the way he said it seem aggravated? Horn seemed even more frightened.

"I, uhm... My family... We were born in a town in the former Demon Lord's Domain, away from Zircon Tower... But we got split up from my parents when we were all really young."

"Oh?"

Horn's voice felt more natural, as if she wasn't forcing her tone to be as masculine anymore.

"I think they may have abandoned us... But ever since I could remember, it was just my two little sisters and me."

"I see."

Just staying alive was difficult in the former Demon Lord's Domain. Raising three children in that sort of environment was surely too laborious for Horn's parents to handle.

"So I don't know if my parents are dead or alive anymore... But we were lucky, because Teach picked us up soon after."

"Teach... Your teacher, who taught you how to be a Seeker?"

“Yes. Teach was a Thief, though...”

“I see.”

When it came to detecting danger and disarming traps, Horn’s skills were fairly low for a Seeker. But her agility was decent, so in terms of parameters she was closer to a Thief.

“Last year, Teach passed away, and I was separated from my little sisters... So I ended up traveling to Zircon Tower alone.”

“Your sisters didn’t come with you?”

“No. A trader took them in as employees. He invited me, too, but I’m no good with that sort of work...”

“I know how you feel. Just the thought of negotiating with other people makes me want to challenge a dragon all on my own.”

“Huh...? No, selling cheap stuff for expensive prices just doesn’t sit well with me. I know that’s how business works, but still.”

“Hm... I see.”

Horn didn’t have any social anxiety, and, come to think of it, was really assertive when she invited Diablo and his party to the dungeon.

“Grasswalkers look like children no matter their age, but exactly how old are you?” Diablo asked, trying to change the conversation’s direction away from his odd comment.

“Ugh... Just...keep it a secret from everyone else, okay? You’re the only one I’ll tell, Boss... I’m actually twelve years old.”

—*What!? She actually is a kid!? I thought she looked this young because she’s a Grasswalker!*

“I thought as much,” Diablo said, hiding his surprise as if he had known all along.

“Hehe... So you knew, huh? But if people found out, no one would want to adventure with me. So keep it a secret, okay, Boss?” Horn said, poking her tongue out in a childish gesture.

It was adorable.

—*Wait, no! I’m not a pedo!*

A pedophile Demon Lord; would he ever be able to show his face in public? And he had just recently kissed Klem, who pretty much looked like a little girl, even if it was for the 《Enslavement Ritual》 ...

Diablo shook his head, banishing those thoughts from his mind.

“Nnn... It’s so dark.” Horn cast her gaze into the cave ahead.

“That’s no problem. 《Light》 !”

Diablo cast the spell on a pebble he had picked up. Last time he cast it indoors, he found there was a problem: He had no idea how to turn it off, so he devised a new way of using it now. By casting the spell on a pebble, all he had to do was throw it away once he didn’t want the spell to work anymore. Carrying it like a lantern was also convenient and easy enough.

“Oooh, that’s amazing!” Horn’s eyes positively shone with excitement. “It’s the first time I’m going through a dungeon with an Elemental Sorcerer, but I never knew Elemental Magic could be so useful!”

“People in this world simply did not research it enough.”

“That’s true, not many Sorcerers use it. I’ve never seen an Elemental Sorcerer as strong as you, Boss. Makes me wish I could learn magic, too! Not that I’d be able to, hehe.”

Those words made Diablo think...

“I know not of how one goes about learning magic in this world, but...why *don’t* you try learning it? You’re still only twelve, and Grasswalkers are good when it comes to magic.”

“Whaaa!? N-No way. You have to go to one of the Mage’s Association schools to become a Sorcerer... I don’t have the money for that.”

“Is it expensive?”

“I don’t really know how much, but probably a few million friths?”

“Hmph...”

Despite having resolved quite a few large incidents, he and his group didn’t have that many friths to their names. Klem’s biscuit guzzling habits drove them near-bankrupt, to the extent that Edelgard, a Fallen, had to take up work at a bakery.

—If her cover gets blown, getting driven out of town would be the least of her troubles. I wonder how she’s doing...

Even if regional knights were to gang up on her, Edelgard would probably get out of it unscathed. But Faltra’s governor, Galford, was strong. By Diablo’s estimate, he would be stronger than her by a ratio of 6:4.

Diablo really hoped nothing bad had happened...

“I hope they’re all right...” Horn whispered.

“Agreed.”

“Lumachina and the others, I mean.”

“Oh, them.” Without noticing, he had whispered in his natural voice.

“Is there someone else to worry about...?” Horn tilted her head in confusion.

“No... It’s, hmm, because I’m a Demon Lord! Just forget about that, I’m sure there’s no need to worry about them.”

“D’you think they’re OK?”

The ceiling was gradually becoming lower. Diablo proceeded, minding not to bump his head.

He and Horn had gotten lost on the ninth floor. The whole group was nearly through before being interrupted, and Shera would have

shot down anything coming their way. Shera and Rem had gotten to the next level, for sure.

Come to think of it, the Paladin had also fallen into the water...

"This level should have a large mid-boss monster near the end, but it has no debuff resistance. Shera could probably take it out with her petrification."

"Shera's amazing, isn't she!"

While there was no doubting she was very skilled, her bow had been enchanted by a real Demon Lord.

"The tenth floor has a puzzle involving a moving floor. One misstep, and you are thrown into a room full of monsters."

"Haaah!? Will they be all right!? That sounds so dangerous!"

"I'm sure Rem will solve it. She's cautious and wise enough to stop and analyze any situation."

"Whoa, you can really trust Rem, all right! She's got smarts!"

"And the eleventh floor is a graveyard."

"Uhm...graves? Why are there graves down there?"

"Because moving corpses come out of them."

"Eee!!! Z-Zombies!? You mean zombies! The living dead are super scary!"

"Lumachina should be able to take care of them easily. She's a High Priest, after all. No one in Lyferia can match her when it comes to 《Purification》."

"Then it'll be a piece of cake! Way to go, Lumachina!" Horn's expression brightened up, her eyes shining with excitement once more.

"Yes."

—So long as the Death Knell disease hasn't worsened...

In-game, a patient's condition wasn't too severe until the ninth mark surfaced; it looked as if they had a bad cold, at best. But Cross Reverie had toned down some topics to avoid getting into imagery that was too erotic or violently graphic. Diablo had no way of knowing if the Death Knell disease behaved similarly in this world.

"But I'm still worried!" Horn held her head nervously. "I can't believe you got separated from Rem and the others because of someone as useless as me!"

—She shouldn't call herself useless... Not that I'm one to talk about self-esteem, though. I know exactly how she feels.

If he was to scold her, telling her not to look down on herself, it would only make her feel even more miserable. So Diablo chose to say nothing.

He didn't regret saving Horn, even if it meant getting separated from them. They weren't amateurs.

They called Diablo their "companion," too. They'd relied on him,

but at the same time, could take pride they weren't "just reliant" on him. They would definitely be able to clear the way until the eleventh floor.

"But we must hurry and regroup with them. Beating the twelfth floor will be impossible for those three."

"Huh? Why's that?"

"Their levels are too low. It's not a matter of strategy or compatibility... The last guardian in the twelfth level is simply too strong. Its debuff resistance is high so the petrification probably wouldn't trigger, and it has a barrier that nullifies all damage below a certain threshold."

"What kinda monster is that!?"

"We can't take our time here."

After walking a short distance, they could hear the sound of wind, its whistle rebounding across the cave. They could also see a light further ahead.

"Did we make it out, Boss?"

—That waterfall sent us falling a long distance from the ninth floor... There's no way the tunnel leads outside, though, right?

Making their way out of the tunnel, they found themselves in a wide-open area.

"M-M-Mon...!?" Horn shivered in terror.

Several stag-beetle-like creatures, each bigger than a normal monster and bearing large horns, lay in wait. These monsters would move in packs and burrowed in the ground to make their nests.

They were large, black, insect-type monsters called 《Ant Beetles》, and there were roughly 30 of them.

Diablo could ascertain their numbers not due to a skill his in-game character had, but thanks to a special ability granted to him because of his experience as a player. He remembered these monsters.

If you were to take a wrong turn on the tenth level, you would get dropped into a colony of Ant Beetles, which was probably where Diablo and Horn were at the moment.

Diablo's lips curved into a smile.

—I've got a grasp on where we are now... If we can make it through here, we'll be back on the correct route.

Diablo put an hand on Horn's shivering shoulders. "You should be pleased."

"I-I mean, sure, I'm an adventurer, and if I had to pick, I'd rather die on an adventure, but not right now! I'll die sooner or later, but not today!"

"That wasn't what I meant. Behold, you despondent little fool."

The Ant Beetles, noticing the intruders in their territory, turned their attention to Diablo and Horn. The part that should have served

as their faces opened up, revealing rows of gigantic fangs. It was far more gruesome than anything Diablo had ever seen in the game.

Diablo turned his war scythe against the monsters.

“Crush them with the speed of sound: 《Sonic Boom》!”

†

The twelfth level—

“If you hold your life dear, turn back here.”

Reading the words written on the gate, Rem swallowed anxiously.

“...We’ve gone through floors with high-level monsters, but this is the first time a warning has been so direct. We need to steel our resolves for this, it seems.”

“Let’s go! We can’t turn back after coming this far!” Shera’s line of thinking was clear and simple; and like she said, now was no time to hesitate.

“...True. But we must make sure we’re prepared and proceed with caution.”

“I’ll support you with all my might.” Lumachina nodded. “Having you two worry about me any longer would be simply unbearable.”

“...Thank you for believing in us. We’ll definitely bring you to the lowest level. The item that can dispel the Death Knell disease will be down there...and I’m sure Diablo will come for us, too. Let’s go ahead and wait for them to meet us on the thirteenth floor.”

“Let’s.”

“We’ll do our best, Rem, Lumachina!”

The girls’ gazes intersected as they steeled their resolves.

Rem put her hands against the door and pushed. Air spilled from beyond, carrying a sour, acidic smell to it.

A large, wide cave welcomed them. The ceiling was higher than previous floors, and seemed to spread out beyond where the eye could see. They could also faintly make out...

—A *blue sky*...?

This was probably a huge, deep shaft going all the way up to the surface from these depths.

Could we have used the shaft to get down here faster?

But just as that thought came to mind, Rem realized there was surely a reason Diablo didn’t do so. The walls were smooth, as if they had been brushed and polished countless times. The floor was also the same; while it wasn’t exactly flat and level, it was smooth to the point where they couldn’t find any vegetation growing.

But there was no time for speculating as to the nature of this place.

Someone was ahead of them, and they had just defeated a monster.

A humanoid monster lay defeated on the ground. Rem had only ever seen it in books, but...in all likelihood, it looked to be a 《Death Dancer》. It was a skeleton with several pairs of arms, capable of cutting adventurers into ribbons with a special finishing move called 《Bloody Dance》. The books also had a strict warning: “Run away immediately if you run into this fearsome monster.”

That monster now lay defeated, reduced to a still, unmoving corpse. The one who defeated it was clad in azure armor.

“Oh dear, you were behind me?” He brushed up his long hair. “Silly me, I was so anxious to catch up I ended up getting ahead of you.”

His tone was feminine, but he was undoubtedly a man. Lumachina took a step back.

“Gewalt...”

“It’s been a while, Lumachina. Isn’t it about time you croaked already? I’ll send you to your beloved God’s side, so do us both a favor and don’t resist, m’kay?”

“You’re the Paladin who attacked us on the ninth floor.” Rem stepped in front of Lumachina. “I won’t let you lay a hand on her!”

“That’s right!” Shera called out, nocking an arrow to her bow.

“Heh heh heh... I’ve seen what you can do, Elf girl.” Gewalt brandished his sword with one hand. “A bow that can Petrify is pretty scary... Buuut it’s still no match for me.”

Gewalt tossed a crystal.

—*A Summon!*

Countless small, winged insects appeared before them: 《Fire Bees》. Though each one’s individual strength wasn’t high, they were the worst possible opponents Shera could face with her bow. Even if she were to try to fight the group as a whole, all she would shoot down would be a few insects.

The same held true for Rem’s Summons; she didn’t have anything in her arsenal capable of wide area attacks.

“Ugh... In that case, we have to defeat the Summoner!

《Asulau》!”

Rem threw a crystal as well. A three-horned ox appeared, but it alone would be no match for a Paladin. She knew that very well.

Saddler, a Paladin she had fought in the past, defeated it easily. Asulau’s abilities were equal to a level 40 Knight, but Paladins were approximately level 100. With just that, Rem couldn’t win.

Rem proceeded to summon more beasts to her aid. “《Rockpup》 and 《Dragonfly》, come on out!”

Rockpup was a level 25 earth element wolf Summon. A bit generic, but its bite was powerful and it charged the opponent rapidly. Dragonfly, despite its impressive name, was nothing more than a giant dragonfly, a level 20 wind element Summon. It didn't deal much damage in combat, but its swift flight made it an agile opponent.

Maintaining three Summons took a toll on Rem's MP consumption, but paying that no heed, Rem wiped the sweat from her forehead and gave her orders.

"Go, my Summons! Now, Shera!"

"Right!"

The three Summons charged the Paladin. As they did, Shera, the true offensive force, took aim. Gewalt's one sword wouldn't be fast enough to deal with all four threats at once.

"Aaah, seeing weak girls becoming so desperate..." Gewalt's lips, decorated with lipstick, distorted into an ecstatic smile. "I can never get enough of this feeling of superiority... Simply ir-re-sistible!"

He proceeded to summon again. Green vines appeared from the ground as blood-red roses bloomed in front of Gewalt, hiding him from sight. These deflected both Rem's Summons and Shera's arrow.

"Wha!?"

"What is this!?"

"Heh heh, this is my rare Summon, 《Rose Prison》," Gewalt said flirtatiously, with a proud smile on his lips. "It can't move, but your attacks will have no effect on it. I can just kick back here and watch while my Fire Bees make short work of you."

On one hand, he had a summon that, while weak individually, moved as a swarm; on the other hand, he had an immobile summon that excelled in defense. Each one had its disadvantages, but when put together, they covered each other's weaknesses.

—He's so strong!

Rem clenched her teeth. They were both Summoners, but the difference in their abilities was night and day.

"Tell me, Paladin! If you're this strong, why did you turn to such evil acts!?"

"Heh... Why, you've got it backwards. Why live honestly when I have all this power at my disposal? Your logic's all messed up, sweetie. Buuut that's enough chit-chat—time to die~"

The swarm of Fire Bees charged toward them. Rem braced herself, unable to come up with a means of defending.

But at that moment, a gust of wind had blown in their direction; a powerful gale of wind. The squall blew away the Bees, which turned back into a crystal that hit the ground.

"My Fire Bees!" Gewalt cried out in shock.

—Was that air magic? Could it be Diablo!?

But Rem's hopes were immediately dashed. The source of that gust of wind, powerful enough to knock a person into the air, descended from above, its massive body blotting out the sunlight streaming from above. With its back to the sky, the light had cast an impressive, ominous shadow over itself.

"What...?" Shera, who had also looked up to the sky, whispered with her eyes wide open. "A...dragon?"

The magnificent creature's scales were pitch black. From the top of its horned head to the tip of its solid, heavy tail, the dragon was probably 30 meters in size.

"A Large...Black Dragon..." Rem uttered through her trembling lips.

Among the species known as Dragons, there were some that were considered magical beasts, and some that were not. Black Dragons weren't categorized as magical beasts, and left corpses behind when defeated. Creatures that didn't fall into that category were generally classified as beasts, or monsters.

But there were many that fell under a third category, that was neither of the races nor the Fallen: Dragonkin. This was because they were capable of—

"Foolish Dram Ones yond disturb Our land, We shalt give equal and fair death unto thee!"

...telepathy.

This voice had echoed inside their heads. Dragons were incapable of speech, but could still communicate in one form. It was unknown how they learned it, but they were nonetheless able to employ human language.

"Wh-Wh-What are we going to do, Rem!?" Shera was trembling in terror.

As it turned out, the twelfth floor wasn't the lair of a Death Dancer, but of a 《Large Black Dragon》.

"...Ugh. It's like the sign said: If we held our lives dear, we should have turned away at the entrance. But..."

If they were to turn back now, they would never gain the treasure that could dispel the Death Knell disease.

"So we have no choice but to fight!?"

Gritting her teeth, Shera nocked her bow, and launched an arrow at the dragon. Her shot hit its mark, crashing against the dragon's scales; but Petrification didn't occur.

"Why...!?" Shera asked, her eyes wide with shock.

"Oooh... We feel the power of the Demon Lord from thy weapon, Dram One. Fascinating... But 'twill has't nay effect 'gainst Us."

“...In all likelihood, the magic energy Klem put into the bow isn’t enough to break through the dragon’s magic resistance by itself,” Rem said, wiping cold sweat from her brow.

A dragon’s strength is decided by its size, with a Large-class dragon likely serving as the Dragon King of these parts. The amount of magic Klem granted for the sake of self-defense simply wasn’t enough in this situation.

The dragon landed from the sky, resting on the ground lightly.

“If ’t be true thou art to intermit, Dram Ones, show Us the extent of thy power! Till despair overtakes all, and fain shall thee accept death!”

“This can’t be real!” the Paladin bellowed from the center of the cave.

Having called back Rose Prison, Gewalt scurried away, trying to flee the dragon, eventually finding refuge by cowering against the wall.

“P-Please wait—don’t! I’ll leave right away! I never had any interest in this dungeon in the first place! I just wanted to get rid of those bitches over there!”

The dragon’s massive eyes looked down on the Paladin.

“If ’t be true thou shall not intermit... We shalt end thee swiftly with this!”

Rem recalled the description from the books she’d read: “Black Dragons can make use of an Acid Breath attack to spray their opponents with acid. It is said to be powerful enough to melt sword, armor, and human flesh alike.”

“Tch! Don’t think you’re better than me, you shitty lizard! I’ll turn you into Dragon steak with this! Come forth, 《Ifrit》!” The Paladin threw another crystal on the ground.

Rem couldn’t hold back her shock. She’d heard of it through rumors, but it was the first time she had ever seen this high level Summon. While Gewalt was still as loathsome as ever, his strength was undoubtedly close to the limits of what the races could ever hope to achieve.

The rainbow-colored crystal shattered and a pillar of flames burst forth, extending up to the heavens. Rem felt as if the heat wave was going to blow her away as a scarlet fiend of flames appeared; it was like lava had been given human shape.

In terms of height, Ifrit stood head-to-toe with the dragon, the ground melting beneath its feet.

“Agh... I can’t believe...he had this up his sleeve the whole time!” Rem covered her face with her hand, trying to shield herself from the heat.

Had he summoned Ifrit from the beginning, Rem and the others would have been killed before they knew it. So why didn’t he use it?

Why, for a very simple reason. Gewalt gripped his chest, wheezing heavily. Even for a skilled summoner like him, maintaining a summon of Ifrit's strength took a massive toll on his MP.

"Whoaaa... Who should we even cheer for here, Rem?" Shera looked at the two monsters, suspense and horror weighing down on her heart.

"...The Large Black Dragon wants to kill us. If it defeats Ifrit, there's no doubt we're next."

"You're right! So we should cheer for the Paladin-man now, right!?"

"...But if Ifrit wins, it'll go after us once it's done with the dragon."

"Ehhh!?"

"...Our only way out of this is if they end up killing each other. We should back up whoever seems to be losing."

Rem prepared a crystal in hand, waiting for a chance to present itself.

Shera nodded. "L-Let's do everything we can to get out of this!"

Lumachina brought her hands together in prayer. "My Lord, please...protect us..."

†

Ifrit began its attack.

As long as a Summon remained materialized, it continually consumed its Summoner's MP, so Summons were ill-suited for drawn out battles. For this reason, Gewalt spent no time analyzing the situation and ordered the attack immediately.

Dragonkin were not only powerful, but also knowledgeable and wise. According to one theory, Dragons inherited the memories of their parents.

"Wield thy pow'r to its fullest extent, Dram One."

"Oooooo!!!"

Ifrit moved in to strike; but it was a feint, as it took the chance to grab the dragon by its horns.

"Shaaa!!!" the Summon roared, lava flowing from its abdomen and washing the opponent over with infernal heat.

This was Ifrit's special ability.

The air shivered and shook. It took Rem a second to realize that was the dragon's cry. Her grip on the crystal in her hand tightened.

—So, the Summon is stronger after all...? In that case, now's my chance to attack the Paladin while he's occupied with keeping Ifrit manifested! But if I attack too fast, and the dragon ends up coming out on top, our lives would be forfeit... I have to gauge both of them carefully. How much damage did the Large Black Dragon receive from that last attack...?

Its black scales were burning, and it appeared to have sustained significant damage.

“Not yet! Keep attacking it, Ifrit!” Gewalt screamed hoarsely.

Having changed most of its body to lava, the Summon once again assumed a humanoid form and began ramming its fists into the dragon. Ifrit’s burning body wasn’t its only weapon; even its normal attack power was extraordinary.

The dragon’s 30-meter tall body stirred unsteadily, but the attacks wouldn’t cease. Pushing the dragon against the cave’s wall, the summon continued to beat it mercilessly.

As the attack continued, time passed on mercilessly, and Ifrit unleashed its special ability a second time. Turning its body to lava once again, it faced the dragon, spewing the molten inferno all over.

“Sha!” The Summon hissed as it attacked.

—*I-Is it over!?*

Rem brandished the crystal over head.

“No...” Shera’s breath was stuck in her throat.

Hearing that whisper, Rem gave up on the idea of summoning anything since the meaning behind Shera’s reaction was—

“Is yond all, Dram One? Has’t thy hadst thy fill of despair? If ’t be true so, may death claim thee!”

The dragon, which was beaten helplessly till now, slashed forward with its front legs. Its claws mowed down Ifrit as the Summon attempted to revert to a humanoid form, crushing the upper half of Ifrit’s body.

“It can’t be!” Rem shrieked.

Ifrit was a Summon with an almost indeterminate form. Even if it lost its shape, it could restructure itself. It hadn’t gone back to being a crystal, which stood as proof it wasn’t defeated yet.

Ifrit gradually assumed shape. Taking aim at the Summon, the dragon opened its gigantic jaws.

Rem felt as a shiver run swiftly down her spine.

—*Acid Breath!? And...I think we’re just barely in the attack’s effective range!*

“We have to run, Lumachina!” Rem grabbed her by the hand.

“Y-Yes!”

“You too, Shera!”

“Got it!”

They got away from the entrance. Immediately after, the Large Black Dragon spewed a black fog from its mouth, hitting Ifrit point blank.

The lava gradually liquified, in a manner different from its former,

vigorous form. It melted and spilled over the floor before vanishing, leaving only a black crystal rolling on the ground in its wake.

“Aaaaaahhh!” Gewalt squirmed in agony. “It can’t be! Impossible! M-My ace in the hole! It’s the strongest! How can the strongest Summon lose!?”

“This is the limit of the races.”

There was pity mixed in the dragon’s voice. After communicating telepathically, the dragon swung its tail. Having been softened by Ifrit’s heat and Acid Breath, the ground easily gave way, gouged by the tail.

The tip of the tail grazed against Gewalt.

“Gah!?”

His sword was sent flying, along with his right hand, still gripping it. Blood moistened the ground beneath him.

“D-Dying...” Gewalt crumpled to his feet.

The Trap Worm appeared beneath him.

Rem’s eyes flew open. She thought it was strange; from what she heard, Gewalt was beaten by one of Diablo’s spells, one powerful enough to destroy the whole area around them. So how was he alive?

Apparently, he used the Trap Worm. It was a Summon that burrowed underground, and was capable of swallowing people whole. Usually, it was used to lure opponents into traps, but Gewalt had used it as a means to escape.

—Such resourcefulness!

He was, without a doubt, the most impressive Summoner Rem had ever met.

But even he was no match for the Large Black Dragon. He may have damaged it, but that still left no opening that Rem could take advantage of.

The dragon’s tail ripped across the ground yet again.

“We shan’t allow thee escape!”

The dragon’s tail struck the Trap Worm, sending it and Gewalt flying.

“Gaaah!?”

The worm slammed against the wall and crumpled to the ground, where it lay still, limply. It appeared to be a mortal blow.

—I can’t believe the gap in strength between them was this large!

Suddenly, Lumachina, who had been running next to Rem, turned on her heels and began running the other way, rushing to Gewalt’s side.

“W-What are you doing!?” Rem called out, dumbfounded. She took after Lumachina in a hurry.

Shera followed after Rem and Lumachina. “I-Isn’t this really bad!? The dragon’s looking at us—he’s looking straight at us!”

But these acts of selflessness were what made Lumachina who she was. Adventurers like Rem could never understand her way of thinking.

“Are you still alive!?” Lumachina knelt near Gewalt.

“Ack... Uuu... Wha...? Lu...ma...china...?”

“Please hang on! I’ll heal you!”

“Heh, heh... It seems I’ve...made a bit of a blunder... Silly, old me...”

With each word he spoke, blood spilled from his mouth. His internal organs were seemingly ruptured by the impact. His breaths came out in peculiar, unnatural wheezing sounds.

“Our Lord in heaven, heed this voice seeking salvation,” Lumachina prayed. “Heal the grievous wounds that torment this man. Give clemency and forgiveness to his sins, and spare his life...”

“I wanted to kill you...and earn all that money...wear pretty dresses...and play around with men...”

“Grant your salvation unto him! Grant your forgiveness unto him!”

“Are you that stupid? I...wanted to kill you, and that shitty lizard... Heh, I still do. If I had my hands...I’d strangle the life out of you...right now...”

Both of Gewalt’s hands were gone, and his legs were bent in odd, unnatural directions. It was a miracle he was still alive and breathing. Maybe he owed that to his high level and well-made armor.

“True, your hands are stained with grievous sins,” Lumachina said, continuing to pray, “which is precisely why you must reflect on your sins and atone. It is not yet time for you to return to the Lord’s side. Please, live on!”

“Stop it... I will never, aton—ack!” Copious amounts of blood stained his azure platemail.

“I beg of you, my Lord!”

“Kuh... You’re wasting your breath... Even God would, abandon...a foul woman like me...”

“Your forgiveness unto him! Grant your forgiveness unto him!”

Lumachina joined her hands at her chest, clutching the holy sign with all her might. A white light shone from the holy sign, gradually enveloping Gewalt’s body.

“Th-The pain...is going away!” he said through gritted teeth. “Stop it... Please...stop... Do you have any idea what I’ve done all this time!?”

“Even still, God will surely forgive you!”

“After all this time!?”

Lumachina gripped Gewalt’s once severed hands, which had reappeared at some point.

—*Are the High Priest's miracles truly this powerful!?*

Rem's eyes were wide in shock. She'd heard Lumachina's talent was rare even in the history of the Church, and had witnessed her miracles several times already...but was she truly this gifted?

Rem was shocked beyond words.

"Everything will be fine." Lumachina smiled brightly. "Even when on the brink of their final moments, so long as people repent, God will forgive all sins."

Gewalt's eyelids squeezed shut, a single transparent drop spilling from the corner of his tightly closed eyes.

"That right...? God sounds like a...good man..."

His breath gradually became calm and rhythmic. Despite the fact he was so deeply wounded, it was a miracle he was even alive. He was now sleeping soundly, as if he was nothing more than exhausted.

The power of Lumachina's miracles was astounding...

And yet, the fact they were still in the worst possible scenario hadn't changed in the slightest.

Rem looked up at the dragon. "We have no desire to fight. Could you please let us go?"

"Oooh... An elf with a bow enchant'd by a Demon Lord, and a human did bless with one of God's wings. Truly fascinating... But thou... Art thou not the vessel?"

"Huh...? Do you...know about me?"

"The Demon Lord's soul... I sense it."

"...It was within me, in the past. But I've already removed it."

"The Dram Ones at each moment fail to und'rstand coequal themselves. Howev'r faint, it still remains within thee."

"What!? But then..."

The Demon Lord Krebskulm's soul was sealed within Rem; the only way to release it was either through Rem's death, or a certain ritual. She put her faith in Diablo and allowed for the ritual to take place so they could extract the Demon Lord from within her and defeat it. But the Demon Lord Krebskulm had lost their memories, reduced to a biscuit-loving girl who didn't wish to inflict harm upon the races.

Rem placed a hand on her stomach.

—*Is the Demon Lord's soul still inside me!?*

"We know of the w'rld. Of divine providence. Of heaven and Earth. As wouldst be natural, f'r within Us runs the blood of dragons. We art heir to knowledge dating back to the genesis of this w'rld, f'r it runs through our veins, unhind'r'd since ancient times. And we know coequal of how the w'rld shall end."

"...If your wisdom is so vast, could you not understand our situation? Please, spare us!"

—*The Demon Lord's soul is still inside me! All the more reason I can't afford to die here!*

"The lives of ye Dram Ones art but a transient moment in the annals of time."

"...From the perspective of Dragons, perhaps that's how it seems."

"In yond case, shouldst thee kick the bucket anon by Our hand 'r some anon time matters not."

"What!?"

"Thy existence is the same as a change in the currents of the winds... The same as coming across oddly color'd grass... Ere our eternal life, thy existence is as meaningless as a stone on the roadside..."

"No!"

The Large Black Dragon inhaled deeply, sucking in air with a shrill whistling sound.

—Is it going to use its Acid Breath!?

They no longer had any means of getting away from its effective range. Using a Summon to defend herself would probably be useless, for it could even beat a powerful Summon like Ifrit with one blow. The Summons Rem had contracted with wouldn't buy her any time.

A black fog burst from the Dragon's massive mouth—

A spear of light pierced the dragon's jaw.

Its head flung back, the acid breath spraying across the wall and melting rocks that littered the cave's floor.

"An injury...upon Us!? Who is't art thou!?"

Rem and the other two turned their gazes to where the spear of light was fired. The entrance door was opened, and there he stood. Even with a different weapon and outfit, there was no mistaking him.

They could see him, the person they had trusted the most.

Gripping a menacing war scythe, the man laughed arrogantly.

"Heh, you think yourself a God with a mere level of 140? Don't make me laugh, you overgrown newt!"

Rem couldn't hold back the tears in her eyes as she cried out:
"Diabloooo!!!"

†

"Dram One!" A hoarse voice echoed in Diablo's mind. *"Howev'r proficient thou may be at manipulating magic, to dare Us is the height of folly! Be did prepare to did cast thy brief candle hence!"*

The Large Black Dragon had communicated telepathically, and, though he didn't let it show, Diablo was internally surprised.

—*Whoa, awesome! So this is what telepathy is like! It's like one of those hallucinations I get after marathoning an event for days.*

Putting that enthusiasm aside, despite all the bravado behind his taunt, Diablo was in terrible condition at the moment. For starters, his equipment was gone; in terms of both his weapons and armor, he was effectively fighting naked. And to top it off, his HP and MP were both greatly diminished. The prospects of fighting a level 140 monster in this state were terribly slim.

Diablo glared up at the dragon.

—*There's no way I could say that, though...*

The fact that Rem and the others were still alive was a miracle in and of itself. When he had heard the sounds of fighting coming from the twelfth level, he could feel despair threatening to overcome him. On top of being level 140, Diablo configured the Large Black Dragon's behavior to "Super Active," so whenever it would find an adventurer, the dragon would always go all out in trying to defeat them. There was no room for coincidences with this monster. It would never happen to be asleep or not be in the mood to fight. And with his party's levels, the dragon's first attack would be all it would take to wipe them out.

It sounded like the fighting was pretty fierce. Did someone other than the girls fight the dragon? Whoever it was, thanks to them, Diablo had made it in time.

From where he was standing, he couldn't see who was lying next to Lumachina.

"W-Whoa, boss..." Horn chimed in, peeking in from the shadow of the doorway. "I-It's a dragon! I've never seen a dragon before!"

"They're not that uncommon if you go deeper into the Demon Lord's Domain. Though they are a bit more crafty compared to the magical beasts."

"Th-That sounds like trouble!"

"Stop panicking. If you're that scared, close the door. I'll call for you when I've taken care of it. Its Acid Breath can affect you even behind cover; just breathing the acid in the air will burn your lungs."

"Yikes!?" As instructed, Horn closed the door.

—*Well, it's not like I'm any less susceptible to it than she is.*

An Elemental Sorcerer who was specialized in firepower was weak to AOE attacks. The Demon Lord's Ring would deflect any spells, but a breath attack was considered a special ability.

However, Diablo had a fighting style reserved for fighting these types of opponents.

"Hmph... I'm in something of a hurry here. I haven't the leisure nor the desire to waste my time on the likes of you, inferior Dragonkin."

“Oh, thou dare fig Us. In yond case, as per thy wish, We shalt give thee death!”

Diablo was surprised the Dragon fell for the taunt. The monsters he had set on the other floors all acted as he configured, with one exception: when the monsters were excited by Shera’s singing.

Maybe it was because Dragonkin could talk, but the dragon’s reactions were even further removed from what he would have expected of an AI.

Diablo pointed his war scythe at the dragon.

“Come light, gather forth. Creep out from within the darkness, and punish those that oppose Providence—”

“Kick the bucket under the weight of thy hubris, Dram One!”

Flapping its wings, the Dragon rose into the air and began charging at Diablo, brandishing its massive claws.

Since Diablo no longer had Tenma’s Staff’s incantation time-shortening effect, casting spells took longer than usual.

—Make it in time, make it in time, I should make it... All right!

“《Hercules Lance》!!!”

A lance of light, roughly five meters in length, appeared in Diablo’s hand and flew onward, clashing with the dragon’s charge. With its large body, the Dragon had no way of avoiding it.

The opponent’s magic resistance was high, but Diablo’s level was higher. The excess magical energy would offset it, and Diablo had already confirmed he could damage the Dragon.

The level 120 light element spell—Hercules Lance. The spear of light pierced the dragon’s torso.

A tremble ran through the air.

“Heh, so you actually use your voice when you scream,” Diablo said, smirking.

“Such power! To bethink thy couldst pierce through Our scales!”

“True, I am powerful. But aren’t you too weak? I’d have thought you’d be stronger than that.”

The monsters in this dungeon were all the same level Diablo had set them to. It wasn’t like in other places where “they’re weaker compared to the game since they’re not used to fighting.”

Yet still, the Large Black Dragon wasn’t as strong as it should be. He had planned to use the Hercules Lance to threaten it and create an opening for a real finishing move, but he didn’t plan to deal this much damage with the equipment he had on.

It didn’t make any kind of mathematical sense that Diablo would deal this much damage with his current equipment. Only one explanation came to mind.

—Is it possible my level is above 150 now?

Even as he considered that idea, he continued maneuvering about,

his movements and the timing of his spells impeccable thanks to the habits that had been ingrained into him from countless hours of playing Cross Reverie.

Setting it in an angle where it wouldn't hit Rem and the others, Diablo unleashed yet another light element spell at the dragon. The Large Black Dragon was of the darkness element, so light spells should have done 50% more damage to it.

"You're amazing, Diablo..." Rem said, her voice shaking in awe and amazement.

"We're saved! He came to save us!" Shera cheered, embracing Lumachina with excitement.

"My Lord...I knew you would protect us..." Lumachina's tears welled up in her eyes.

The dragon's scales shattered, and brown, earth-colored blood scattered across the cave.

"Impossible. It cannot be! A dragon...losing to a Dram One!? Did push back by one of the races!? It cannot be... Hadst it been a group it would has't been conceivable, but..."

"Heheheh... Do you still not understand? You are not facing a mere child of the races!"

"What...!?"

"I am Diablo! A Demon Lord from another world!"

"Ah!? Th-That name... Diablo...? We know of it... In the past, We has't certes...known one who is't go by yond name..."

"Oh...?"

Diablo couldn't hold back his surprise. Maybe the dragon remembered having been set here by Diablo. Could it possibly have memories from the game...?

"Tell me, fool... Do these words ring familiar to you? The MMORPG, Cross Reverie."

"Augh. We doth not wish...to kick the bucket..."

"Hmph." Just as Diablo asked that question, he had launched a 《Thunder Axe》 spell at the dragon, severing one of its wings.

"We doth not wish to...kick the bucket..." The dragon stepped back unsteadily. *"We mustn't kick the bucket yet!"*

"Didn't you say something earlier about it not mattering if they die now or later?"

"We has't yet to produce offspring... Thither is nay one...to inherit Our memories..."

"You utter fool..." Diablo said, lowering his war scythe.

Turning his back to the dragon, he refused to continue his attack and instead heaved a heavy, morose sigh.

—*I get it now. You're a virgin too, aren't you?*

Diablo figured that, since the Dragonkin were so few in number, finding a mate must have been difficult.

The dragon fled to the back of the cave, leaving spots of its dark brown blood across the floor.

—*It can't fly anymore, after all.*

But in the direction it was headed, a single girl stood.

“What!? No!” Diablo exclaimed in shock.

He had no idea who the girl was, but he had noticed her far too late. The Large Black Dragon glared at the girl standing in its way with bloodshot eyes.

“Doth not stand...in our way! We mustn't kick the bucket! We cannot kick the bucket yet!”

The girl brushed up her violet hair, the expression on her face not changing in the slightest.

“Who approved your retreat? You are the twelfth floor's guardian... Disobeying the Master's orders is punishable by death.”

Diablo's eyes shot open with surprise. Those clothes, that appearance...

He remembered her.

—*It can't be, is she...?!*

“Move! If it be true thee receive in Our way, coequal thee shall not escape Our wrath!” the dragon threatened.

Black smoke billowed from its punctured throat and body. While its power was somewhat diminished, the dragon unleashed its acid breath onto the girl.

The girl swung the tools in her hands: a sword with dual blades extending from each end of it and a chainsaw with a blade made of shining energy beams. Weapons as far-removed and foreign as could be to this world's middle-ages setting.

“It is time to clean, then.”

The moment the acid breath was about to hit the girl, it gradually began to dissipate; the sulfuric fog did not reach her.

“How dare thee, thou mere cleaning tool...!?” the dragon howled.

“So you would call Rose a tool... Very well. Rose has all the more reason to dispose of you, then. Master is the only one who may treat Rose as a tool.”

The girl who called herself Rose thrust her weapons into the ground. Having his breath blocked, the dragon resorted to swinging his claws at her.

“Thou shalt regret standing ‘gainst Us, doll!”

Rose, who hadn’t changed her expression until now, gritted her teeth and bellowed, “Do not...call Rose...a doll!!!”

A massive sword appeared out of thin air, very similar in appearance to the sci-fi like sword the girl previously wielded.

A steel hand gripped the sword’s handle. It appeared armored, but Diablo noticed the hinges at its joints. Pipes ran through it like arteries, and Diablo could see symbols and letters, like the ones seen on a magic circle, carved on them. The symbols shined all the way to its fingers, as if they were distributing energy.

The mechanical arm moved, deflecting the dragon’s claws with the dual-bladed sword and pushing the dragon back with each slash.

“Oh... Oh... Oh!?”

“Hehe...hehe...hahahaha! You’re trying to beat Rose in a contest of strength!? You dumb lizard!”

The mechanical arm that hovered behind Rose was a part of her. It shattered the dragon’s claws and severed its scaled front legs, spilling copious amounts of blood on the ground as the dragon’s cries of pain once again shook the air.

“Inconceivable... To has’t did injure us this much...”

“For all your boasting, Rose thought your scales would be a little tougher than this. Rose will have you know she is only getting warmed up.”

“Wh...at...!?”

“Now! It is time for you to atone for your crimes with death!

《Crius》!!!”

The hand that floated behind her slashed the sword horizontally with ease, which should have been impossible given its weight. The sword moved so rapidly, Diablo found it hard to follow the edge with his eyes.

The wind shrieked and whistled as it was cut. The sword danced, shattering the dragon’s scales, cleaving its flesh, shattering its bones, and painting the cave with its brown blood.

Eventually the Large Black Dragon’s torso was split in half.

“Gah!”

“Be silent.”

To finish it off, she thrust the sword into the beast’s drooping head. With this, the dragon’s telepathy disappeared from Diablo’s mind.

Rose turned her gaze to Rem and the others.

“There’s still someone left? Rose is not the twelfth floor’s guardian, but there is still need of cleaning u—”

The girl’s emerald eyes met with Diablo’s. There was no doubting it—

He remembered her.

When he made his dungeon in Cross Reverie, Diablo set a certain piece of furniture in his “Demon Lord’s Chamber.” It was a piece one could buy with in-game currency, called a 《Magimatic Maid》. While it looked human, it was actually an automata that operated on magic...or at least, so said the in-game description. According to that same description, its combat abilities were supposed to be very high and it should have had many handy features, but none of that was implemented in the game. It would only wander aimlessly around the room with a vacuum cleaner in hand, which earned it the moniker of “Roomba” on the message boards.

Reminiscing of that time, Diablo was overcome with emotion.

“Do you remember those times, Rose?”

“Mas...ter...?”

“I am Diablo... No. Perhaps you would know me better as @Diablo-13.”

Rose froze in shock, the dual-bladed sword dropping from her hand and slamming against the floor with a powerful, ringing clamor. The mechanical arm that had hovered behind her disappeared silently.

Maybe in this world it acted like a Summon? It only existed in the game’s setting but was never actually put into use in-game, so Diablo had no way of knowing, but Rose’s strength was without a doubt exceptional. It was safe to assume she no longer had any desire to fight.

Diablo stepped closer to her.

“I’ve finally returned, Rose.”

Her shoulders trembled and her eyes widened in shock as beautiful, transparent tears rolled down her handsome cheeks.

She whispered back with a tremble in her voice, “W... Welcome back...my Master...”

Chapter 5: Changing Equipment

The thirteenth level—

“The Demon Lord’s Chamber”

“Hm.” Diablo surveyed the room, nostalgia filling his heart.

“...Disgusting.” Rem grimaced. “The place feels like we’re inside some huge creature’s body...”

“It really does...” Shera looked frightened, too.

Horn refused to move from the girls’ sides. She had covered her torso with a large cloth that Rem had carried along to serve as a blanket. Diablo was naked above the waist while Horn was completely naked. Explaining the circumstances behind that was pretty hard. The fact that Horn was actually a girl was without a doubt the most surprising part of the story...If they hadn’t been in the middle of a dungeon, and in a hurry to cure Lumachina’s Death Knell disease, they would no doubt be subjected to some rather ruthless questioning.

For having brought upon such an impressive miracle, Lumachina was exhausted, and had to borrow their shoulders to walk. Her good nature was beyond belief.

She had healed Gewalt, who came for her life, from grievous wounds. That same Gewalt had disappeared at some point while Rose and the dragon were fighting.

—Will a villain like him really repent?

There was still a chance he would come to kill Lumachina again. Staying vigilant of him would be wise.

Rose had taken the lead, leading them further into the chamber.

“Rose believes she just heard you criticizing the Master’s aesthetic choices, but...” Rose smiled ominously at the girls. “No, surely Rose’s ears are playing tricks on Rose.”

“...When you say ‘Master,’ you’re talking about Diablo, correct?”

“Why, of course.”

“...So this place is...designed by your tastes, Diablo?” Rem asked, visibly baffled.

Keeping it hidden any further would be difficult. But how was he supposed to explain this? If he could have come up with a convincing explanation, he’d have done so days ago.

“This dungeon was located elsewhere before,” Rose began explaining, “but it was transported here, by some inexplicable power.”

“...Is that even possible?”

“Given that it actually happened, Rose would surmise it is. And when this dungeon existed in its original place, it was my Master who created it.”

“What!?” Rem fixed her gaze on Diablo in surprise.

Diablo felt cold sweat wash over him. He also felt smiling smugly over the achievement of conquering his own dungeon would only make this awkward.

They’re probably disgusted with him now. They no doubt think he’s a complete idiot, a cringy idol otaku.

“I see...” Rem nodded with a pensive, serious expression. “So that’s how you knew about all the traps... Yes, it makes sense.”

“You made this dungeon, Diablo!? That’s amaaaaazing!” Shera exclaimed enthusiastically, her eyes positively shining with excitement.

He never expected them to react like that.

“But weren’t you lost earlier...?” Horn asked with a curious expression.

—*Awww crap, they’re poking holes in my story now!*

Diablo was flustered on the inside, but kept a straight face.

“The Master specified the internal design and the placement of the traps for each floor,” Rose explained. “It stands to reason he would not know of every single little passageway. Rose should have welcomed him at the entrance and transported him to the lowest level, in the first place...” Rose hung her head and ground her teeth in frustration. “Rose cannot believe Rose has failed to notice the Master’s joyous return... Rose is a defective failure of a maid. Please, dispose of Rose in any way you see fit.”

“Pay it no mind, Rose,” Diablo replied with a calm, collected tone.

This world was different from Cross Reverie. There was no login screen or menus to navigate, so he had no way of starting from his personal space.

“Such kindness! But it is fine, my Master!” Rose said, swaying and wiggling where she stood. “If it will quell your anger, Rose will gladly subject herself to any punishment! Tear off Rose’s arms, crush Rose’s head; whatever you see fit! No matter what my Master desires, Rose will, Rose will!”

Rose’s expression took on a more flushed, ecstatic expression than one would probably expect out of someone discussing their own punishment. Her breathing was erratic, too.

Diablo was a bit creeped out by her behavior, but a Demon Lord would never falter at the words of a maid. He shrugged with feigned composure.

“Didn’t I tell you not to pay it any mind?”

“Y-Yes! Of course. Pardon Rose for her behavior. Punish Rose

however you see fit for this transgression! Preferably physically!”

—*Why is she so fixated on getting punished!?*

“Hmm, Diablo...” Rem asked, eyeing them suspiciously. “May I ask what type of relationship you have with her? Forgive me if this is, hm, a personal question...”

Her words seemed uncharacteristically cold. And just as he was trying to think of a good way to explain, Rose answered the question with her index finger held up.

“Hehehe... Why of course, Rose exists to service the Master. Every finger and digit, every nook and cranny of Rose’s body, each and every strand of hair—all of it exists to satisfy the Master.”

“...I’m sure we can all see how...earnest, your loyalty is. But I asked Diablo, not you.”

Even though she had seen how powerful Rose was just moments ago, Rem still faced off against her unflinchingly. Diablo was impressed with her courage and nerves. The two glared at each other.

“If she weren’t one of the Master’s guests, Rose would have carved her to bits with 《Asterismos》...” Rose whispered under her breath.

“...You are Diablo’s servant, while I am his companion. It goes without saying which one of us is higher, no?”

Rose clicked her tongue sullenly. The Asterismos she mentioned was the giant, dual-bladed sword she had wielded earlier. The sword had twelve unique techniques that traced the constellations... Or so the setting went, but it was unreleased in the game proper.

Diablo couldn’t believe it was capable of slaying a Large Black Dragon. If this was ever implemented in-game, it would have totally broken the balance of personal dungeon raids.

Diablo suddenly recalled how Rem and Shera would argue all the time when he had only just met them. They still quarreled, but by now it had become less “actual” arguments and more friendly little squabbles.

“Enough of this foolishness,” Diablo said, cutting between Rem and Rose. “We haven’t the time to discuss the past; we have more pressing issues to attend to. Rose, does my treasure vault still exist?”

Her explanation was convincing enough, so he decided to stick with that. Rem and the others looked like they still had plenty they didn’t understand and wanted to ask, but they didn’t cut into Diablo’s words, for they realized what Diablo was trying to prioritize at that moment.

They had to dispel the Death Knell disease from Lumachina’s body. If they didn’t get the item, there was no point to coming this far.

“Of course, the treasure vault is perfectly intact. Please follow Rose.” She motioned deeper into the chamber.

The door behind Diablo's throne led to a vast, empty void that seemed to spread out endlessly. No one would believe something like this was buried beneath the desert. Maybe this place operated on the same logic as Diablo's pouch, where It was magically connected to somewhere else, or maybe the void itself was created by magic.

Countless rows of stone pedestals were lined up in the void, spreading out as far as the eye could see. An item was placed over each pedestal.

Rem narrowed her eyes. "...This place looks like a graveyard. Did you make this, too, Diablo?"

He shook his head in response. "In the other world, all I had to do was specify what I wanted and it would be delivered to me immediately."

"Woow, that sounds like you were a king!" Shera exclaimed.

"Of course. I am a Demon Lord, after all."

In other words, in the game, all he had to do was pick an item from his storage's list, but he had no intention of going into the specifics of that.

Looking at the countless items, Diablo was overwhelmed by the sheer number. There should have been some feature to sort them by their type and their rarity...

"Hmm..."

"Are you looking for something in particular, Master?"

"I need the White Ox Statue."

It was a prize from a limited-time event, and was categorized under "Important Items."

"That should be over there, then." Rose nodded. "Please follow Rose."

—All right, she remembers where it is! Rose, you're so useful! I'm sorry for calling you a Roomba when I only just got you!

"I permit it. Show us the way." Dancing a little victory dance in his mind, Diablo nodded in a solemn, Demon Lord-esque fashion.

"As you wish, my Master." Rose bowed respectfully and began leading them through the vault.

Soon enough, Diablo detected a familiar item resting on one of the pedestals. It was an ivory-colored statue of a calf, shining with a faint light. He wanted to rush forward and grab it, but...

—No, I can't. A Demon Lord would never do that. Calm down.

Diablo was role playing as a Demon Lord. If he didn't pretend to be someone else, he would be unable to talk to anyone. If he tried to talk with his own voice, he would only stutter and choke on his words. The memories of all his past failures would rear their ugly

heads, taking away his ability to think properly.

—Right now, I'm the Demon Lord Diablo. Keeping up appearances like this is important.

Only a novice adventurer would be jumping for joy after finding the treasure vault. Diablo was above that. He put all his will into not hastening his gait as he approached the pedestal.

"Heh... All this trouble for this foolish item." He snorted with the haughtiness one would expect from a Demon Lord.

"Is this it, Diablo?" Rem asked.

"Indeed." Diablo nodded. "This is the White Ox Statue."

Finally! Everyone raised their voice in a cheer. Shera and Horn's eyes shone with excitement, while Lumachina got on her knees and brought her hands together in thanks.

"...How are we supposed to use it?" Rem asked.

"Hmph, you don't know?"

—I'm actually just as clueless as you are.

In Cross Reverie's story, all the White Ox Statue did was glow. As it often happened in games, the screen flashed white which served as substitute to the cutscene, and after that a dialogue with the NPCs that were healed of the plague popped up, where they thanked the players for their heroism.

"Hm... I think I know how to use it." Lumachina stepped forward.

"I would expect no less of you. Go forth and use it. I allow it."

Not letting the surprise show on his face, Diablo stepped aside, allowing Lumachina to approach the statue. Lumachina placed a hand on the White Ox Statue's head.

"I can feel it... This warmth... It is of the Lord's power."

Lumachina closed her eyes. What went through the depths of her heart right now? Diablo had no way of knowing.

A white glow emanated from the statue.

"Wow..." Shera leaned forward, gazing at the spectacle before her with wide open eyes.

Rem, in contrast, took a step back and observed the ritual cautiously. Horn hid behind her, visibly frightened.

Diablo observed things unfold with an air of composure, trying to stifle his anxiety.

—I'm pretty sure it'll go well, but I'm still nervous.

Would the statue have the same effect as in the game?

"Ngh..." A pant escaped Lumachina's lips. Her cheeks gradually became more flushed, and beads of sweat appeared on her pale skin. "Ugh... Aaah... Aaah... Nnngh..."

A shiver ran through her body. Her free hand, that wasn't touching the statue, cradled her abdomen.

"Nnngh... Aaah..."

“Are you all right?” Diablo asked.

Lumachina nodded. “Yes. I can...f-feel God’s presence... He is very close by...”

“I see.”

So she can feel His presence...

A black fog began seeping out of Lumachina’s body.

“Aaah... Hng!”

The fog seemed to be seeping quite thickly from the slit of Lumachina’s dress.

“Aaagh... I-It’s hot!” Her moans were mixed with anguish.

“Are you OK, Lumachina!?” Shera rushed to her side, lifting her skirt up.

Death Knell disease was a fatal condition. This was an emergency, and could be considered a sort of medical treatment, so it would be crazy to see this as indecent.

Calming himself at the sudden change in the situation, Diablo kept his gaze fixed on the two, swallowing his saliva in anxiety.

Shera flipped up Lumachina’s skirt, exposing her inner thighs, where the marks of the Death Knell disease had surfaced.

“Oh... I think they’re getting fainter!”

“Ngh... Aaah... Yes... This statue is...filled with God’s power... Nnngh!”

Lumachina’s body twitched and writhed. Shera supported her back, keeping her from collapsing.

“Keep going, Lumachina!”

“Y-Yes!”

“Look, you can hardly see the marks anymore! Just a little more and you’ll be cured, I’m sure!”

Shera stroked Lumachina’s thigh, near where the marks were fading away. Lumachina’s body reacted immediately, jolting as if it had been struck with electricity.

“Aaah! Th-That place... It’s sensitive...right now!”

“Oh, sorry!”

“B-But I think...it’s starting to feel...better...”

“Really? Th-then, how about this? Does this hurt?” Shera caressed Lumachina’s skin gently.

Lumachina inhaled sharply. As if concentrating on the touch of Shera’s fingers, she stabilized her breathing.

“Ngh... Mgh... Aaah... Aaah... Ngh!”

“How’s that, Lumachina?”

“When you touch me...it tingles...really hard...”

“That kinda sounds what it feels like when someone is sending magic into you.”

“I am... Aaah... Receiving God’s power...after all... Ngh...”

“Yeah! I can tell, the light is going inside you, and it’s flushing out all the icky dark stuff!”

Shera could see the flow of magic in things. While it was hard to tell from her usually slow-minded conduct, she was actually a genius when it came to these matters.

Her fingers combed Lumachina’s skin gently, and each time they did, the High Priest moaned coquettishly.



“I-I can’t stand...anymore...”

Unable to maintain her balance any longer, Lumachina’s knees looked like they were about to buckle, but Shera embraced her from behind, supporting her.

“Just a bit more, Lumachina! Just a little, teeny bit more and all the bad stuff will go away! It’ll all go far, far away!”

Shera’s slender white fingers gripped Lumachina’s inner thigh, where the marks of the disease were, squeezing on the skin forcefully.

Lumachina’s back bent like an arch, then—

“Aaah! Ngh! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!” A high pitched scream escaped her lips.

Diablo could see it clearly: A lump of black magical energy escaped Lumachina’s body, as if driven out by the white light. The White Ox Statue absorbed the ominous lump of magical energy, then the statue’s glow gradually waned.

It was over.

Lumachina lay exhausted, her limbs outstretched. Even Shera, who had supported her, looked completely drained of strength.

†

Diablo caught the two, supporting them.

“Are you all right?”

“Lumachina fell asleep. I think she’s fine now.”

Lumachina’s breathing was calm and relaxed. Diablo couldn’t detect anything wrong with the flow of magic in her body.

“I see. So it is done.”

“Yep! The curse is all gone now,” Shera said happily, pulling up Lumachina’s skirt.

True enough, her inner thigh was white and unblemished. The dark purple marks were all gone, which meant the Death Knell disease had been completely dispelled.

—*We can breathe easy...*

It had taken a lot of hardship to achieve this, and Diablo perfectly understood how happy this must have made Shera, but...

With Lumachina’s skirt pulled up, he could see not just her inner thighs, but her panties, too. If she wasn’t asleep, she would probably be screaming in a panic right now.

Soon after she had moaned like she did, her panties were right in Diablo’s line of sight. Maintaining his calm was incredibly difficult. He’d been traveling with Rem and Shera ever since he arrived in this world, but he had no prior experience when it came to interacting with girls. Frankly speaking, this was far too stimulating for him. But blushing like an inexperienced boy was something no self-respecting

Demon Lord would ever be caught doing.

Diablo turned to Rem, trying to hide his embarrassment.

“We’ve finally sorted this out.”

“Oh... Ah, yes. I knew you would come through for us, Diablo,”

Rem replied.

Her face was red as a beet, and she was rubbing her thighs together. Maybe she was embarrassed from seeing Lumachina, too.

Horn, who was standing next to her, was in a similar predicament, with her eyes more moist than usual.

“U-Um... C-Can you tell me where the toilet is?”

—*The toilet!?*

Diablo never thought of adding one to the dungeon when he planned it in the game. He didn’t think a Demon Lord’s dungeon would require such a thing.

—*A toilet over here, a bathroom over there...and a kitchen would be nice right around here... As if! That’d be a Barbie doll house, not a Demon Lord’s dungeon!*

But he couldn’t say that after all this time, now could he? But he’d probably need to use a toilet himself at some point, too.

He turned to Rose; a Magimatic Maid would probably be the right person to ask about this.

“Heh... A foolish question, isn’t it, Master?” Rose smiled coldly, looking down on Horn. “Such a filthy facility has no place in a Demon Lord’s dark abode.”

“Whaaa!?! Demon Lord lairs sound pretty scary to live in!”

Horn wasn’t the only one complaining; Shera and Rem looked horrified as well. Diablo was also perplexed.

—*I can’t believe this! I should have set a toilet here back when I made it... Next time, I’ll include one on every floor.*

Horn, her face pale as a sheet, looked around desperately...then grabbed a large silver goblet from one of the pedestals. In terms of size, it was more a vase than a cup.

“This! This! Can I borrow this!?” Horn begged with a severe, desperate expression.

“S-Sure.” Diablo had no choice but to oblige; he had a feeling something terrible would happen if he didn’t.

Horn ran off to a distant corner, out of earshot, and hid between the pedestals.

Rose frowned, knitting her brows. For a mechanical doll, her expressions were incredibly detailed.

“Are you certain that was acceptable, Master? Wasn’t that...?”

“I am well aware of what that was. But I have no need of it anymore.”

—*That was an item I got from a collab. It had a pretty flashy name,*

too...

《The Holy Grail》.

If he recalled correctly, the item description went something like this:

“Those who answer the Holy Grail’s query correctly will receive the heavens’ divine blessing.”

Diablo tried his hardest not to think about how Horn would put it to use.

“Rose cannot fathom why you would lend your treasures to such a lout...” Rose said, still discontent with the situation.

“So be it. I’ve been meaning to lend my equipment to these people, anyway.”

“What!? You will let your precious collection fall to the hands of these miscreants!? Impossible! Your possessions belong to no one but you, Master, and Rose’s role is to manage—”

“Them having better gear to defend themselves would make matters easier for me. ‘These belong to no one but me,’ no? I am free to use them as I see fit.”

“Ngh... As you wish, Master...” Rose bowed, grinding her teeth all the while.

Diablo placed his hand on her head, and stroked her hair gently. It was silky, soft, and pleasant to the touch.

“I’m grateful for your help, Rose. If it weren’t for you, just finding what I came here for would be a challenge.”

Rose stiffened, her shoulders jolting as if in shock. Diablo then recalled something he read on the internet once, about how one mustn’t touch a girl’s hair without permission.

—Wait. Even if she’s a mecha-maid, Rose is still a girl... Would that make this sexual harassment? Then, does that make me a molesting Demon Lord...? Did I screw this up big time!?

That said, apologizing to a servant for sexual harassment didn’t feel very Demon Lord-like. He’d have to think of a way to talk his way out of this.

As Diablo was struggling to think of something, Rose raised her head to meet his gaze. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were virtually glittering with elation.

“Rose will do anything you wish, Master!” she said with a shrill, animated voice.

Diablo nodded in response. He didn’t really understand what just happened, but it looked like she was pleased, one way or another.

Having settled matters with Rose, Diablo turned to Rem and the others. “I’ve kept you lot waiting. Now come! I will grant you my treasures.”

Surprise filled the girls’ eyes.

“A pity I haven’t any Summons I can lend you.”

Diablo wasn’t a Summoner, so he didn’t have any Summon Crystals in his possession. While it didn’t quite constitute for a replacement to better Summons, Diablo was able to prepare some light armor that would fit Rem.

“...Wh-What is this?”

“It is called a 《Gemstone Gambeson》. It’s a rather rare item.”

It was an SSR-rank full body armor which provided high physical defense and magic resistance, and also boosted the wearer’s speed. If it were properly upgraded, it would lend even more beneficial effects, but Diablo had simply stored it as soon as he got it, so it remained a “Zero-fold.”

Rem hesitantly took the Gemstone Gambeson. “Can I really have this?”

“Try it on. You should be able to equip it.”

Enchanted equipment had level requirements, so characters below a certain level would be unable to equip them. At least, that’s how it worked in the game.

But he had more items to give her. Rose carried the item he had specified: a ring with a rainbow-colored stone on it.

“Master, Rose has brought the 《Wilderness Ring》.”

“Excellent. Rem, this ring will strengthen your Summons. It will triple your MP consumption, but your Summons will be all the stronger.”

If she were over level 100, he would have been able to give her better items... Levels were a measurement of one’s strength, after all, and honest effort was the only way to raise your level. Neither this world nor the MMORPG were forgiving enough to let weaklings score victories just because they happened to nab good equipment.

“Impossible...” Rem shivered in awe. “If they become that much stronger, they would be almost entirely different Summons.”

“That is how Summoners become stronger. Your equipment and magic reinforce and strengthen your Summons, otherwise you would be outdone by warriors with superior equipment.”

Warrior-type classes used weapons and armor that increased their strength and damage several times over. A Summon without any sort of enhancement couldn’t hope to match it. Because Summons were so useless unless they were enhanced by magic, Summoners were ridiculed as a “Gimmick Class” in the game.

But this world wasn’t an exact copy of the game.

Rem was skilled in close combat, but that didn’t mean she was well-suited for a defensive role. Even if she wouldn’t necessarily die,

she could still get severely injured. That's why Summons were a safe alternative for her.

Finally, he handed her a pair of gauntlets.

"These are called the 《Beast Bracers》. They, too, boost your speed, and inflict extra damage against beast-type enemies. Wild beasts, Summons, magical beasts... Frequently encountered enemies."

"...Right."

"For now, just try putting it on."

"...Understood. Thank you very much, Diablo."

"Don't think too much of it."

"...Um..."

"What is it? Do you need anything else?"

"...No, of course not, you've given me so much already. It's just that... Umm..."

"Hm?"

"I can't change...if you keep looking at me," she answered, going red in the face.

"Oh!?"

Diablo hadn't realized because to him, he just saw it as equipment to be equipped. But full-body armor was essentially pieces of clothing, so Rem would have to strip down to her underwear to put it on.

"...I'll go try it on."

Rem scurried away, holding the equipment Diablo gave her in her arms. Diablo turned his gaze away from her retreating back.

"A-All right. Shera's next."

†

"Yes!" Shera raised her hand enthusiastically.

Diablo examined her from top to bottom.

"Hmm... I see... All right. I've got nothing to give you. Next!"

"Huuuh!? That's so mean, Diablo! You gave all that stuff to Rem, but you're giving me nothing!? Give me clothes or something, too!"

"But what you're wearing is an Elven royal heirloom, isn't it? It must have many enchantments on it already."

"Probably!"

"If you were over level 100, I could get you better armor than that, but at your current level, that's the limit."

Rose nodded, standing beside Diablo. "According to Rose's superior appraisal skills, that full-body armor is the 《Coat of Princess》."

Diablo never heard of that armor; it was probably never implemented into the game.

"Rose, can you tell how many times it was enchanted and enhanced?"

“Of course, Master... Her Coat of Princess was enhanced seven times. It was enchanted to increase all physical attributes, as well as increase magic defense.”

—So, *this is EX Rank equipment, too.*

It was the same rank as Diablo's Curtain of Dark Clouds, though there was probably a difference in terms of the level required to equip it.

Needless to say, none of the equipment he had here, which was unenhanced given he had just thrown them into the vault as soon as he obtained them, would match it. The same held true for her weapon.

“Your bow was originally strong, but it's been enchanted by Klem. I doubt you'd find a stronger bow at your level.”

According to Rose's appraisal, Diablo also learned the bow was called 《Silvestre Bow of Darkness》. It had an increased firepower and accuracy effect, and it also had a high chance to Petrify each time it dealt damage.

The shocking part, though, was that it required a level of 70 or above to equip, which meant Shera's level as an Archer was over 70. Rem would be mortified if she heard that.

“Oh, phooey,” Shera said, hanging her head in disappointment.

“You hopeless little fool. Shouldn't you be happy knowing you've been blessed with powerful equipment?”

“But I'm sad only Rem gets presents from you, Diablo...”

—That's *what's bothering her?*

“Troublesome girl... Well, come to think of it, I should have some arrows. Use them well. There should be some 《Tempest Arrows》, as well, around a hundred or so.”

“Whoa! That's amazing!”

Diablo instructed Rose to bring over several types of enchanted arrows, which should have been a step up from the 《Evergreen Arrows》 commonly sold in shops.

“Can I really use these!? Woow, which should I pick...” Shera grinned widely at the sight of the quivers full of colorful arrows.

“Which ones should I take...? Oh thank you, Diablo!”

“These will surely help you grow stronger...”

“Yep!”

“As an Archer.”

“Ugh... I'm not sure if I should be happy about that... Should I really use these...?”

All her excitement was gone in the blink of an eye. She wanted to become a Summoner, after all. But Diablo thought it would be better if she focused on being an Archer.

Diablo shifted his gaze to the next person.

“Time for you, Horn. Let’s start with getting you some clothes.”

Shera’s gaze suddenly fell on an item sitting on one of the pedestals: a silver-colored ring.

“You gave Rem a ring, right? I want a ring, too! Can I have this one?”

“Do as you wish.”

There shouldn’t have been any cursed items in the vault, and there was plenty of useless collector’s items in here. That was why Diablo didn’t bother to check what she took. Either way, he wouldn’t use it since he wore the Demon Lord’s Ring.

Shera happily slid the ring on her left ring finger.

†

“Why is this Grasswalker naked? Rose does not understand the meaning of this.” Rose tilted her head curiously.

“Because I took her clothes off.”

Diablo replied bluntly, but that explanation didn’t clarify the situation any, and Rose’s head remained tilted.

“You could have at least left my pants on!” Horn complained, her face red.

“You should be thankful I saved your life. Besides, I have prepared clothes for you.”

“Ah, then thanks, Boss! I wouldn’t be able to go back to town like this!”

“You are a Thief, right?”

“This might sound like nitpicking, but I’m a Seeker, not a Thief!”

Ignoring that comment, Diablo sorted through the items he had, trying to think of what would be best for her. With Horn being level 20, there weren’t many options to pick from, but Diablo nonetheless instructed Rose to bring a few items.

Since Horn couldn’t see above the pedestals with her height, the items were spread out on the floor.

“This one is called the 《Treasure Mini》. It increases your speed, and also grants a bit of magic resistance. Of course, it’s also enchanted to increase your physical defense.”

It was equippable at level 20, but was a superior SR-rank piece of equipment. But while all that was fine and dandy, it had one important difference compared to the clothes Diablo had burned.

“A skirt!?” Horn’s eyes were as wide as saucers. “And a mini skirt, at that!?”

“So you’ve noticed. Impressive.”

“Of course I did! Anyone would!”

“Don’t let that bother you.”

“You can bet your bottom frith it’ll bother me! What if we have to

climb up a ladder, or I have to bend over... What if I fall!? Everyone'll see my panties! What kind of pervert goes dungeon crawling in a miniskirt!?"

—Okay, Missy, that's enough of that. Do you have any idea how many people you're picking a fight with right now?

Diablo folded his arms menacingly, so as to stop Horn from making any more potentially catastrophic statements.

"It can also raise the morale of any male party members."

"I don't want to form a party with anyone who gets all cheery looking at my panties!"

She was twelve years old, after all.

"Say what you will, but this is the best gear I can offer someone who's level 20."

"To find fault with my Master's generosity..." Rose gave a thin, joyless smile. "Rose ought to abandon you to rot on the fifth floor. I'm sure that'll teach you the extent of your foolishness."

"Isn't that the snowy level!?" Horn screeched in terror.

"Heheheheh... Don't worry. Rose guarantees that within ten minutes you won't feel the cold at all..."

"Yeah, because I'll be dead! Please no! I don't want to die!"

—Wait just a second, why don't you...

"If you're that against it," Diablo cut into their exchange, "I can find something else for you. But this may help you dodge a fatal hit, or soften a deadly blow. Are you sure you don't want it?"

Horn's breath got stuck in her throat with an "Ugh," and she stood still for a long moment. All the moments she imagined she was about to die were probably going through her mind right now.

"Nnng... F-Fine. I g-guess an Adventurer should prioritize her life over having her panties seen..."

"That's some sound judgment." Horn was the type to put her life on the line often, after all.

Next, he handed her a cloak and a dagger.

"This 《Transparency Cloak》 should boost your Stealth skill. And here's the 《Shadow Knife》. It's a weapon, but also boosts your evasion, for some reason. It's priceless for a low-level weapon."

"Hmm... Do I really have to throw away my old one?"

Horn stroked her old dagger affectionately. It was a normal dagger, without any enchantments or enhancements, the kind of item any player would just shrug off as scrap metal and have it broken up into Enhancement Materials.

"Is there any particular reason you want to keep it?"

"It's, uh...a memento from Teach," Horn said forlornly, a lonely expression on her face. "A trap made the ceiling collapse on him. He was totally squished... The dagger's all I have left of him."

It was hard to believe a Thief would get killed by a trap like that. And if that useless piece of scrap was his only weapon, he probably wasn't at any level to be taking on apprentices.

"Hm..." Diablo was at a loss for words.

"It is absurd he would call himself a teacher when he was that weak," Rose said coldly. "Empty bravado at its worst."

She mercilessly said what Diablo knew shouldn't be said.

—But I guess that makes sense, for a Magimatic robot...

"Yeah, you're right," Horn said, scratching her head dejectedly. "I never thought Teach was some amazing person, either... But still, he did what he could to take care of us, and I'm grateful for that."

"Oh..." Rose faltered.

Diablo held back a snuffle. He always was a sucker for heartwarming stories.

"Pick whichever you like," he said, placing both hands on Horn's shoulders. "I'm sure even without any enchantments, that dagger will keep you safe."

"Th-Thank you so much, Boss!" Horn grinned.

Her smile had a brilliance that had nothing to do with what race she was or whether she was an Adventurer or not. It was simply the pure smile of a twelve-year-old girl.

†

Horn ran off between the pedestals, cradling her new clothes, this time not to make...use, of the Holy Grail, but to change into her newly acquired gear.

Rem was also still in the middle of changing. Shera headed deeper into the treasure vault to check in on her.

Diablo, in the meantime, turned his gaze to Lumachina. There wasn't anything that could serve as a bed around here, so they had spread out a thick cloak for her to sleep on. She still hadn't woken up.

"Hmph, we'll find something to give her later. All that remains is my equipment... Hm? What is it, Rose?"

"Please do not misunderstand...obeying the Master's will is the greatest joy Rose could ever know, but..." Rose hung her head. "To see so many of your precious treasures in the hands of those louts..."

"There is no point collecting them if I cannot find a way to put them to use."

He had gathered them when he played the game out of a desire to make a collection of sorts, but having someone he could share them with was pleasant in its own way. If the girls could pull their own weights, it would surely make things much easier for Diablo.

Rose nodded, but joy and sorrow seemed to be mixed in her expression.

“All is as you say. Being able to obey your orders fills Rose with more delight than she knows how to process. But at the same time, Rose can feel her heart being torn asunder by jealousy...”

“H-Hey, now...”

“Before all this, Rose was the only one master cherished...”

—*Because I never had any friends to bring to my personal space...*

Looking back at his past, he came to realize he was the sort of lonely person who would talk to his own furniture. Those weren't pleasant memories to reflect on.

Diablo shook his head, trying to shake off those negative thoughts. The present and the future were all that mattered, so dwelling on the past was pointless. Right here, right now, he was the Demon Lord Diablo. And that was most important.

“I had found solace in loneliness, but that's all it ever was.”

“And you are different now, Master?”

“No, that's not quite it.”

He did enjoy being around Rem and Shera, but he still found it easier to relax when he was alone.

“If silence is what you desire, Master, Rose can completely erase all sources of noise in the vicinity,” Rose said with a smile.

“Don't.”

“As you wish...” She nodded, seemingly disappointed.

—*What a handful.*

Her own mental state was shaky as it was, so he couldn't expect her to take care of someone else's anxieties. She said something or other about jealousy, but he didn't have any equipment he could give to a Magimatic Maid...

But then...

—*In Cross Reverie, you couldn't give equipment to a Magimatic Maid. But this is another world. Magic can change the terrain, and dragons and Magimatic Maids can talk. This place is more realistic than a game that took seven billion yen to develop. It's like another reality.*

Diablo reached out to one of the pedestals and picked up a blue-colored hair ornament.

“What is it, Master?” Rose said, her head tilted curiously. “That's the 《Hair Ribbon of Water》, an N-rank item with no level restriction which grants the wearer a 3% resistance to water attack—”

“This is the first item I got in *Cross Reverie*... Ah, sorry. Do you understand what the words ‘Cross Reverie’ and ‘game’ mean?”

“Forgive Rose, Master...”

It appeared she didn't. She understood the dungeon and herself weren't originally from this world, but she couldn't grasp that she was originally part of a video game.

It seemed Diablo was the only one who knew about *Cross Reverie*.

Diablo decided to word it differently.

“This is the first item I ever obtained.”

“Huh...?”

He put the hair ribbon on Rose’s head. He didn’t prepare for this, and it felt bad just giving her whatever was nearby, but he wanted to show his gratitude to her somehow. If seeing the other girls get something made her jealous, hopefully this would make her feel a little better.

Diablo wasn’t witty enough to put those feelings into words properly, so he simply pinned the ornament to her hair silently. Rose just stood there, rigid and stiff as a board. Diablo let go of the ornament, with the same caution and gentleness one would have when trying to balance a coin on a table.

He had no way of knowing if its effect was working, but the Hair Ribbon of Water was attached firmly to Rose’s hair.

This world really was too realistic.

“I don’t think this’ll do you any good, considering how strong you are...”

“Is Rose to keep this safe?”

It appeared she didn’t understand why he had put it on without a word, so Diablo considered his next words carefully.

“No, this isn’t for safekeeping. This is... If you don’t like it, I won’t force you to put it on. But this is a p...pre... It’s a tribute for your services to the Demon Lord!”

His embarrassment forced out his Demon Lord role-play.

Rose had frozen in shock. In-game, he couldn’t talk to her or give her presents, so this felt kind of...weird.

“Master is...giving this...to Rose?” Rose’s shoulders trembled.

“It may not be of much value, but this item carries its share of memories.”

Maybe a Magimatic doll wouldn’t be able to understand the value such a thing held. It seemed he gave her the wrong gift. There it was again, his communication disorder rearing its ugly head... He couldn’t help but be disappointed in himself.

Any trace of anger left Rose’s face, and she returned to her mask-like expressionlessness.

“Thank you very much, Master... Forgive Rose for causing Master any concern. Rose will be fine now.”

“I see.”

Diablo sighed with relief. He never would have imagined he’d have to give a girl a present to quell her jealousy in a world based on *Cross Reverie*.

—This isn't a dungeon crawling RPG, this is some sort of dating sim! The game balance is ruthless, too, just like the oldies...

Doing things he had no experience with exhausted him, but Rose seemed to be feeling better, if nothing else.

Changing gears, Diablo gave Rose the names of the items he needed for his new getup. Rose nodded wordlessly.

†

“Nnn...”

“Oh? Ah, you're awake.”

Lumachina opened her eyes. Noticing Diablo, she hurried to her feet, but lost her balance and tripped. Diablo caught her, mildly forcing her to sit down.

“You shouldn't move so soon. Even if it's been dispelled, the fact remains you've been afflicted with the curse for days. It's only natural you'd be exhausted. And I heard you used a great healing miracle, too... You reckless fool.”

—And you used it on a person that tried to kill you, too... You really are too kind for your own good.

Lumachina gave a little nod and sat atop the cloak, hugging her knees. There was something odd about the way she did it; maybe people in this country weren't used to sitting on the ground? It probably wasn't customary for girls to sit crossed-leg. She was sitting as if she were on a chair, with her buttocks lowered, hugging her knees with her arms.

Lumachina adjusted her disheveled clothes, hiding her exposed thighs, her cheeks flushed.

“Please forgive me. My conduct earlier was...shameless.”

“Not at all, it was a treat for the—”

“Huh?”

He was just about to let something indecent slip...

“Ahem!” Diablo coughed, trying to change the topic. “You needn't worry about it, that was all because of the curse.”

“Thank you so much... Hearing you say that puts me at ease.”

“Just now I've shared items in this vault with Rem and the others, but you're like Shera, no? The gear you have on is already quite remarkable.”

“Huh? You mean my clothes? Batutta prepared this outfit for me... I believe this is fitting for a High Priest, no?”

It appears it had some significant physical defense and magical defense to it, and was well-made and elegant, too. But there were better items with superior effects to what Lumachina was wearing in the vault, and since Lumachina's level as a Healer exceeded 100, she should be able to equip them. But she had her position as a High

Priest to consider, and the Priest's Garb she was currently wearing would be ideal in that regard.

No matter how well enchanted it was, a revealing outfit that exposed her navel or cleavage would be unacceptable.

—For some reason, female outfits become more revealing the higher their level is...

Diablo presented the items he had prepared for her.

"There are bracelets and necklaces, too. Pick whatever suits your fancy. These will come in handy, should you intend to keep fighting to reform the Church."

"There are so many... Thank you, Lord Diablo."

Lumachina's gaze wandered around restlessly.

"Hm? Is something bothering you?"

"No, but...where is everyone?"

It made sense that'd be the first thing she'd think about.

Diablo realized it was weird of him to bring up the gear before explaining where everyone else was. His bad habits as a loner were surfacing once again.

If he wasn't role-playing as a Demon Lord, she would probably doubt his common sense. What a close one.

"They're fine. They're all pretty exhausted, so they're resting in the Demon Lord's Chamber."

"Oh, that's good to hear..." Lumachina said, her expression turning softer and kinder, but continued the discussion of items immediately after. "Hmm... There's actually an item I would like for you to lend me."

"Oh?"

Diablo was surprised. Judging from her personality, he assumed she wouldn't ask for anything.

"Would you mind giving me the White Ox Statue?" she said, fixing her gaze on him. "There are still many people suffering from the Death Knell disease at Zircon Tower."

"Ah, I see. That's very much like you. As always, you put others over yourself."

"I can only see myself as another, normal person... Is it really so odd?"

"It is. But you should stay that way. Should any hardship befall you for it, I'll be there to drive it away. Never change, Lumachina."

In a world where monsters roamed, racial discrimination ran rampant, and the Church was corrupt, Lumachina remained pure and unblemished... Diablo found that to be oh so very precious. He wanted to help her.

"I'm so glad..." Lumachina wiped a tear. "To hear such words from God himself..."

“No, uh...”

She believed Diablo was God. Taking the form of an adventurer claiming to be a Demon Lord, God had descended to this world... That was the story Lumachina convinced herself of. But since Diablo had seen her in her most...vulnerable state, she would have to marry him if he was just another member of the races! That was the logic Lumachina seemed to work under.

Lumachina was virtuous, beautiful and had quite a body, to boot. But someone as socially inept as him could never become a High Priest's groom. Pigs would fly way before that would be possible.

And just like that, Diablo couldn't deny her claims to him being God.

—Lumachina's smart, though... She would see through my lie, wouldn't she?

Diablo gazed at her and she gazed back, not daring to blink.

—She's cute.

She was incredibly cute...but Diablo, who couldn't stand feeling people's gazes upon him, broke eye contact first. He felt like her gaze would see right through him.

“Hm, my Lord...” Lumachina parted her pink lips to speak. “Could I receive the White Ox Statue now?”

“Huh? O-Oh, that. Of course, you may take it... Wait, no. It's pretty heavy, you'll need a wagon to carry it...”

“Oh, I could not ask for more of you. I will do all I can to carry it back myself. I want to deliver it to the town as soon as possible.”

“...We would love to help you.”

A voice spoke suddenly behind them, prompting Diablo to turn around.

It was Rem, a wry smile on her face.

“...You always go to the craziest lengths to help others, Lumachina.”

“Oh my, Rem...and everyone else is here, too...”

“You're all better now, Lumachina! I'm so happy!” Shera exclaimed, running up to her.

Shera threw her arms around Lumachina in a hug. Lumachina happily returned the hug.

“Oh, thank you so much... You were such a huge help to me earlier, Shera.”

“No biggie! Companions are all about helping each other!”

“Companions... It makes me so happy to know you consider me to be your companion.”

“That's bordering on blasphemy, Shera.” Rem shrugged. “Calling

someone as important as the High Priest a mere companion... Oh, that's right... You're royalty, aren't you?"

"Oh, who cares about titles? You, Lumachina, Horn...and Diablo and Rose, too! You're all my companions!"

Shera's words made Rem blush, while Horn seemed shocked.

"Me, too? Really!? Ah, you mean only until we get out of here, right...?"

"No, silly. We'll always be companions! We worked so hard together on this adventure, after all!"

"Rose didn't participate in any adventure..." Rose said with a slightly displeased expression, standing a short ways away.

"Then how about we go on one now?"

"No..." Rose said, visibly baffled by Shera's words. "Master put Rose in charge of the thirteenth floor..."

A thought crossed Diablo's mind.

"Are Magimatic Maids unable to leave their stations?"

"Rose does not know. Rose has never left this dungeon."

"I see... In that case, it's worth checking if you can. We will be heading back to Zircon Tower soon. Lumachina wishes for us to bring the White Ox Statue to the afflicted townspeople."

It was hard imagining a Demon Lord working hard to save others. That said, he was at odds with that image from the moment he began cooperating with a High Priest...

But Diablo's honest feelings were, if it was possible to save those in need, he should do so. Diablo was, at his core, an ordinary person raised in a country that valued helping others.

"Zircon Tower, you say..." Rose said, knitting her brows. "Rose doubts carrying the statue over now would do them any good."

"What? What do you mean?"

Could it be the Death Knell disease progressed faster than they expected?

Lumachina held her breath in fear, and the other girls' expressions hardened.

Rose answered his question in a plain, matter-of-factly tone:

"Because the Demon Lord's army is marching on Zircon Tower right now."

Interlude 2

Lyferian Calendar: Month 7, Day 27, Year 164, afternoon—

Aboard a sand ship's deck, on an elevated throne, sat Laminitus, her gaze fixed on the horizon.

A soldier rushed to her side.

"A report, m'lady! The evacuation of the civilians is halfway complete!"

"Only half... It's taking too long."

"My apologies! Due to the Paladin Captain's absence, our coordination with the Church is difficult. Evacuation of the sick and wounded is taking—"

"Did We not order you to take care of that sooner?"

Lashing out at the messenger wouldn't do anyone any good right now, but Laminitus couldn't suppress her anger. She'd predicted this would happen ever since the day the Demon Lord's Army's Commander-in-Chief, Varakness, had appeared before her. She had made many preparations for when he would attack on the next full moon.

—But the full moon is still three days away!

Laminitus clicked her tongue bitterly. She disliked men who were sticklers for little details, but she hated men who outright lied even more.

Another messenger rushed to her side.

"The Demon Lord's Army is 5,000 melds away! Our scouts have confirmed it! They number roughly 300, and we've detected large-class magical beasts as well!"

—300, huh.

If it were the races, a group of 300 would be meaningless in battles of this scale, and one sand ship's worth of soldiers would be enough to take care of them.

Over the short period of time they had to prepare, Laminitus scraped together a force of 40,000 soldiers and adventurers, and their fleet consisted of 200 sand ships of various sizes. She had an impressive, large scale force...

But it still wouldn't be enough.

They were up against the Demon Lord's army, a mixed force of Fallen and magical beasts. Each and every one of them far exceeded a

single one of Laminitus's soldiers in terms of strength. Even with the odds of 40,000 against 300, they were still no match.

That was all that occupied her mind.

"We need intel on their formation, on the double!" Laminitus began giving her orders. "The enemy has species capable of flight, so keep your eyes to the sky! If so much as a bird draws near the fleet, gun it down!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

The reports came in one after another. The Demon Lord's army was fast approaching, maintaining its speed. The middle-sized magical beasts formed their vanguard, and at the center of their formation, what appeared to be their commander was riding on the back of a large, turtle-like magical beast.

Varakness. The handsome youth with batlike wings.

The enemy's army had drawn close enough that Laminitus could see them with her own eyes. A skilled marksman could snipe them with a Magi Gun from this distance, but a shot or two would do nothing to halt their advance. If anything, they would need to solidify their position and try to draw out the battle for as long as they could.

They needed to finish evacuating Zircon Tower...

Have as many civilians as we can get away from the fighting. Make sure to lose as few troops as possible. And we have to survive this battle, no matter what...

She had no chance of winning with her forces. Zircon Tower would, in all likelihood, fall. But so long as they could minimize their losses, there was still a chance of staging a retaliation.

A scout, who had been surveying the enemy's movements with a pair of binoculars, raised his voice.

"The large magical beast in the center of their forces is breaking formation and coming this way! The enemy commander is on its back!"

"What?"

According to even the most basics of warfare theories, the commander would always be either in the middle or the rear of a formation. No fool would ever move the King out of the safety of the back lines in a game of chess.

Yet the enemy did exactly that.

Laminitus hesitated. This must have been some attempt at provocation. She could issue orders to fire at will, but rumors of how Varakness infiltrated Zircon Tower had already spread among the soldiers.

—If we pull back now, the soldiers' morale would plummet.

The soldiers would believe their commander, Laminitus, was afraid of the Fallen, and maintaining the front line would become

impossible.

She clicked her tongue in frustration.

—*To think a Fallen would employ psychological warfare like this...*

“Captain!” Laminitus raised her voice. “Sail the 《Gallcarius》 forward! There’s no need for any escort ships!”

Answering the taunt, Laminitus ordered the craft she was on, the Gallcarius, to sail forward alone to meet the enemy commander. The ship’s captain was a seasoned veteran, but even he hesitated to challenge the Demon Lord’s army with just one ship.

Despite his doubts, the captain loyally obeyed his order.

“Deploy cannons three and four! Forward at half-speed!”

The ship’s enchanted sails spread, pushed by the wind. The large sand ship sailed onward, leaving the rest of the fleet behind.

Laminitus could tell her unit’s troops were becoming more anxious by the second.

The enemy was drawing near. They were no longer just within range for a gunshot or bowshot; they were within earshot.

†

Just around where the two armies met—

Varakness and Laminitus glared at each other, the former sitting on the shell of a giant magical beast, and the latter aboard a sand ship.

Varakness was dressed in a tuxedo, just like when he appeared a few nights ago. His outfit seemed better suited for a night party in a ballroom than a skirmish on a battlefield. Four women, some with lizard tails or raven wings, doted on him.

—*He did say something about a “harem,” didn’t he?*

“Bringing women to a battlefield!? You make light of Us!” Laminitus shouted angrily. “We shall bury you with your foolish pride!”

“Heh heh heh... These beautiful flowers are my beloved wives, as well as officers of the Demon Lord’s army. And...they will also be your wedded sisters, Fanis.”

“What!?” Laminitus shouted, her gaze growing sharper. “What do you mean, ‘wedded sisters’?”

“I mean that, once I admit you into my harem, they will be your sisters.” Varakness smiled and spread out his arms. “Do play well with them... I absolutely dread it when women fight over me, after all.”

There was a silver ring on his finger, and the four women around him all displayed their matching rings proudly.

“We will never accept Fallen as husband or sister, you disgusting knave!” Laminitus spat bitterly.

“But I’ve prepared a ring for you, as well. I’ve made sure it’s just

your size. Oh, how I cannot wait to put it on you...and make passionate love with you."

"You miserable cretin... We just so happen to have prepared a little gift for you, as well."

"Oh my, what a pleasant surprise!" Varakness once again spread out his arms.

Laminitus grabbed a Magi Gun that sat beside her, a large rifle that matched her in height.

"Take this, you nauseating lout!"

She bent down, supporting the rifle with both hands; her wounded right shoulder had already recovered.

"Get the hell out of my territory, you monsters! 《Lightning Shot》!"

She charged the shot with magic, increasing its firepower, and squeezed the trigger. The bullet was also laced and reinforced by several layers of enchantments.

Just around where the two armies met, the battle's first gunshot echoed loudly.

The bullet pierced Varakness's left breast.

The shock wave spread out as a large hole opened in the opponent's chest.

Varakness looked down at his wound. "Spectacular..."

Uttering that single word, he crumpled, falling on his back. A roar of excitement rose from the races' army.

"King! King! King!" some chanted, singing their praises.

Laminitus smirked, savoring the feeling of decisively striking her opponent. This would no doubt shake the enemy's chain of command and give them a chance to win.

One of the wives ran over to Varakness' side in a hurry. No, running wasn't the right way of putting it, since while her upper half was human, her lower half was that of a fish. As soon as the fish woman touched the body—

Varakness suddenly rose to his feet. There was still a hole in his suit, but the skin beneath had been healed.

"Heh heh..." He smiled confidently. "I will not lie, I am truly surprised. Even before receiving power from the Demon Lord, I've never experienced such a severe injury. Fanis, my love...I will make you my wife, without fail. I swear it on this chest you've wounded."

"So you have a Healer... Crafty bastard."

"You will soon see this beautiful darling as your wedded sister. Treat her kindly, if you can... She's something of a shrinking violet, you see?"

At Varakness's introduction, the fish woman covered her face timidly with her hands.

Laminitus clenched her teeth nervously. She clicked the floorboard three times with the sole of her boots, and the ship's captain raised a hand in response to that signal. Without need of verbal command, the ship's crew began operating the sails. The sails spread out, receiving the wind. The Gallcarius began moving, kicking up sand as it sailed at max speed, trying to get away from the enemy.

As it did, Laminitus gave the order:

"All forces—charge! Don't give them the chance to run!"

The sand ships, who were on standby until now, finally began their charge. The warships served as vanguard, and the Adventurers would later join in... That was their plan, in short.

If they forced a melee battle with the enemy commander out of formation, on the front lines, the Fallen army wouldn't have been able to maintain a proper chain of command. But the turtle-like magic beast showed no intent of retreating.

The woman with the lizard tail, who had sat beside Varakness until now, rose to her feet.

"Can I...? Even though I will destroy...them...?"

"Yes, do as you wish, my love. It is for this reason I separated Fanis from them."

—*What did he just say!?*

A chill ran down Laminitus's spine. The lizard woman spread out her arms, and raised her voice in a shout.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

The air trembled, and at the same time, a large tear ran through the ground, forming a large cliff right in the warships' way. The sand ships fell into the abyss, accompanied by literal waterfalls of sand.

Countless screams echoed throughout the battlefield. Some ships were able to skillfully maneuver themselves and avoid falling into the abyss, but many valuable elite soldiers were lost in the disturbance.

—*Who would think they could use magic of such a scale!*

Laminitus clenched her fist. Her forces had fallen into utter chaos and confusion. Just attempting to count how many ships were lost was difficult.

The Demon Lord's army wasn't kind enough to simply stand by and watch them flounder. The Fallen and their magical beasts charged them, raising nightmarish howls. Varakness's large magical beast remained where it was, and the army's charge made it so it now stood in the rearguard, the perfect position to command it.

—*We were dancing in the palm of his hand the whole time!*

Laminitus clenched her teeth again.

"Use large scale magic to confuse the enemy army, then launch an

offensive..." Varakness said with a smile. "This was a basic strategy in the last war, you know? The races really do grow old and forgetful far too quickly... But I do not find that transient foolishness of yours unpleasant. Now, accept your eternal slumber in the embrace of my wonderful nightmare!"

†

Screams and howls filled the battlefield. Laminitus lay beaten.

—*The front lines crumbled within a day, countless soldiers are lost...*

Even We are beyond help now...

"Ugh... Death is...more preferable...to being disgraced by the Fallen..." Laminitus put a bullet into her Magi Gun.

She shouted at the soldiers awaiting her orders."Even should We fall! We shall never show our back to the enemy! For We are the king of this sandy land!"

The soldiers raised their fists in agreement.

"Your target is the enemy commander! Charge the large magical beast!"

"Gallcarius, move at full speed! Gunners, keep your eyes ahead!" the ship's captain gave his directions.

All the soldiers carrying Magi Guns gathered on the front deck and began firing at the Fallen and magical beasts.

The Fallen weren't all as durable as Varakness; he was simply too powerful. A Magi Gun's bullets would definitely inflict damage on them.

"The problem is getting rid of Varakness' lackeys..." Laminitus glared at the enemy's formation. "The other women probably have irregular abilities, too."

"Right you are ♪"

Laminitus's eyes flew open. From beside her, a woman's voice spoke in an inappropriately bright voice. A moment later, a sharp pain ran through Laminitus's flank.

"Gah!?"

The next thing Laminitus knew, she had fallen down and was now lying on the ship's deck. The side of her body burned with pain, large amounts of blood pooling all around her.

A black mass rose from her shadow, assuming a human-like shape.

—*She came out of Our shadow...!?*

It was one of Varakness' women, the one with raven wings.

"Peek a boo ♪" The woman's black curls shook as she looked down at Laminitus mockingly.

"Y-You...!?"

“Hehehe... Varakness told me to ‘stop the ship,’ buuut... I really hate women who have bigger busts than me, see~ So I don’t want you joining the harem~ So just go ahead and die for me, okay? I’m going to make you die!”

The soldiers standing around her only realized what was happening just then, and it was a moment too late.

They brandished their swords, crying out in defiance, but the Fallen woman caught their weapons with her bare hands which had bird-like talons.

Her ability to come out of shadows wasn’t the only thing that made her menacing. She was a fairly powerful Fallen by her own right.

“R-Run!” Laminitus moaned in pain. But before her words could reach them...

A cadence of odd bursting sounds resounded. It was the sound the Fallen woman crushing the soldiers’ heads, helmets and all. The troops were reduced to corpses in the blink of an eye, pools of their blood spreading around her.

Despair overwhelmed Laminitus.

—Just what in the hell...is going on here...!?

A commander that didn’t die even when shot in the heart. A Healer who can heal grievous wounds in a moment. A Sorcerer capable of annihilating a fleet in the blink of an eye. An assassin who can attack from one’s own shadow...

—A nightmare... The races beat these monsters in the last war...!? Impossible!

This didn’t constitute for a fight.

“Can you even call this a war...?” Laminitus whispered.

“Right right, this can’t be called a war~ This is more a spectacle where the Fallen butcher the races—a massacre.” The Fallen woman laughed maniacally, brandishing her bloodstained talons. “Bye bye ♪ This was fun—as if. You races are too weak to even be a distraction~”

“S-Someone...”

“Mmm?”

“Someone...save them... The soldiers! The civilians!” Still lying facedown on the ship’s deck, Laminitus squeezed out a voice.

“You silly skank~ If you didn’t want to die, all you had to do was... Well, you shouldn’t have even been born ♪”

A flash of light blinded Laminitus’s sight as countless bolts of lightning fell on this battlefield fraught with mayhem.

The rumble of thunder sent shivers through the air. The Fallen woman looked around, her face colored with surprise.

“What’s going on!?”

“What...is this...?”

The weather should have been clear. This phenomenon was entirely unknown to Laminitus.

She could hear soldiers talking from somewhere:

“The enemy strike force has been reduced by half! Th-They’re confused! It seems the lightning...f-fell on them!?”

It was a different brand of surprise from when the large scale magic struck down the ships or when the enemy advanced and spread among the soldiers.

“Pull back. The situation has changed.”

Laminitus could hear Varakness’s voice. His voice echoed from the earring on the woman’s ear.

“Did you hear me?”

“Pull back!? Why!? Let me kill them first!”

“No. I won’t allow you to be stranded in the middle of the enemy’s formation. I do not wish to lose you.”

“Stranded? Me? What are you talking about!?”

The woman looked around as Laminitus rose to her feet.

And then, she saw it: someone floating in the sky.

—*Who is...that?*

It was a man clad in jet-black armor, holding a staff in his hand.

“《Lightning Meteor》 !!!”

The man swung down his staff, and countless bolts of lightning rained upon the battlefield.

An Elemental Sorcerer...

The atmosphere trembled as the magical beasts were reduced to ashes. Magic of this level went explicitly beyond anything the races would ever be able to manipulate.



Chapter 6: Using a New Weapon

“Master, you’re not actually thinking of saving them, are you?” Rose asked, noticeably surprised.

Diablo considered what that would involve: If the city was under threat from the Fallen, he would want to save it. It wasn’t just out of pure empathy; it was also because defending the races from the Fallen was a fundamental part of *Cross Reverie*’s story. As a gamer, he couldn’t back out of defending it. But, rushing to defend a town in danger clashed with his Demon Lord image.

“Hmph, I care not for a human town.” Diablo snorted haughtily. “But the Demon Lord’s army? They would dare gather under the banner of the Demon Lord without my permission? Unacceptable!”

“I see! To not notice your wrath, Master... Rose is both shamed and humbled!”

It seemed the explanation had convinced her.

“...I can’t say I empathize with your reason, but I will accompany you,” Rem said, also preparing to leave. “If a town is under attack by the Fallen, we can’t just leave them to fend for themselves.”

“Right! We gotta stick together when bad stuff happens!” Shera agreed, carrying her bow over her shoulder.

Horn clenched her fist. “I’m going, too! The people in town were always so nice to me, so I want to save them!”

Her knees were noticeably shaking, though. She was scared out of her mind.

“I’m sure the Lord guided us together to do this.” Lumachina nodded. “I will also help you save the town!”

Rose looked at the girls, her head tilted curiously. “I cannot see how you will be of any use in turning the tide of this war. Won’t you just get in Master’s way?”

Rem shook her head. “There’s more to war than just fighting an enemy. Have you ever experienced a real battlefield?”

“Nnngh. Rose has...never left the dungeon since Master created it.”

“...Let me just tell you, you’re luckier than you know. Diablo, we’re ready. Let’s hurry.”

Rem cut the conversation short, but Rose didn’t offer any retort. They certainly had to hurry, and it appeared Rem was more occupied with thinking of the fastest way possible to get to town.

“...No matter how much we hurry, it will take us two days to get to Zircon Tower. If we’re lucky, the town will still be fine upon our arrival.”

It was hard to believe Zircon Tower, a city without a barrier, could hold back an army of Fallen. That was exactly why Faltra stood as a front line base.

Diablo stopped the girls, who were about to rush through the door.

“There’s no point in rushing.”

“...Diablo?”

“If we take two days to get there, the town would certainly fall by then. There’s simply no way we can make it in time like this.”

“Th-That’s...probably true, but...”

Everyone else seemed lost for words along with Rem. Horn even looked like she was on the verge of crying.

Diablo took out an item, a white feather that shone with a pearly hue.

An 《Angel’s Plume》. Using it would transfer the user’s party to any other place in the world. In-game, it was restricted to places the entire party had previously visited so newbies wouldn’t be able to piggyback off veterans.

Would it work the same in this world? Would it even work to begin with? He had his apprehensions when he considered using the 《Return》 spell some time ago, with the possibility of appearing inside a rock being a particularly frightening thought. They would be buried alive.

Should he tell them the risks? There was no point to that. Even if he had warned them, the girls would likely tell him to try it anyway. If they didn’t try, they would never make it in time to save the town from the Demon Lord’s army.

But more than anything, explaining the risk involved in using an item wasn’t Demon Lord-like.

“This is called an Angel’s Plume,” Diablo said, showing them all the feather. “It is a treasure capable of instantly transporting everyone here to any given point.”

“Is that...?” Rem’s eyes were wide with surprise. “Diablo, is this what you had used to transfer you and Shera from the 《Bridge of Ulug》 to Faltra instantaneously...?”

“It’s a bit different from then, but it is teleportation magic all the same.”

“...In that case, we would definitely make it in time.”

“There wouldn’t be much point to using it otherwise.”

“Uh, hmm...”

“What is it?”

“Would it be okay if I...closed my eyes while we do this...?” Rem asked, blushing.

This reminded him of how terrified she was when they had to ride on a sand ship. She hated traveling in any other manner than with her own two legs. There was something charming to that side of her.

“Ah, you mean the thing from that one time? We’re doing that again!?” Shera excitedly leaned forward.

She was with Diablo the last time he had tried teleporting. The opposite of Rem, she found it to be fun.

“What’cha talking about?” Horn asked quizzically.

Lumachina, in contrast, didn’t even question him. She had put her complete trust in Diablo, it seemed. But that was frightening in its own way...

“Master, Rose has never gone to a town before,” Rose said with a sad smile.

“Hm.”

“So this is...goodbye, isn’t it? I will wait for Master...dreaming of the day of Master’s return. Always...”

“Wait. It’s true you’ve never visited another place, but in the game... Wait, no. In that other world, Magimatics weren’t counted as people. I should be able to teleport you with me if you’re considered an item under my possession...”

Having said that, Diablo thought treating her like an object was pretty terrible.

“Master!” Rose looked about ready to cry.

“Oh, ah...sorry... No...”

A Demon Lord wouldn’t apologize to a Magimatic Maid, but he didn’t know how to patch things up. However, that concern turned out to be unfounded.

“How wonderful!” Rose said, her expression lighting up in a brilliant smile. “Rose cannot believe Master would ‘consider Rose an item’... Rose is the happiest maid in existence!”

“I-Is that right...”

“Whenever anyone else calls Rose a tool or a doll, Rose crushes them into paste using Asterismos... But please use Rose like an object forever more, Master. Be it during the day, or at night...”

“Day...or night...”

“Rose wonders how Master would put Rose to use during nighttime...” she pondered, her cheeks turning a rosy pink.

—*Don’t expect me to use you in any weird ways!*

Magimatic Maids were considered tools, so it appeared her set of values were a bit different compared to what others followed.

“Anyway! We haven’t any time to waste. Let us use it.”

Just imagining what would happen if, all of a sudden, it turned

out “Angel Plumes don’t work in this world~” made Diablo break into a cold sweat.

Rem reached out her hand. “Hmm... Could you please...hold my hand while we do this...?”

“O-Oh, sure.”

Diablo grabbed her hand. It was small, a bit cool to the touch, and soft.

“I’m taking this one!” Shera proclaimed.

Shera grabbed onto Diablo’s other hand, so they both held the Angel’s Plume together.

“Wha...!?” Rose’s expression darkened at seeing Shera do so, but the elf princess ignored her.

“You’re considered Diablo’s item, right, Rose? He can carry you on his back!”

“Ungh... That’s a...very tempting idea...but Rose is heavier than Rose’s appearance would suggest, so Rose will settle...for this.”

Rose pinched the hem of Diablo’s clothes. While she may have had the appearance of a girl, she was still a machine. She may very well be as heavy as a lump of iron, and that huge double-bladed sword and the metallic hand that held it could be included in her weight, too. Even Diablo’s level 150 body wouldn’t be able to support that kind of weight.

Lumachina and Horn held hands, and together, the five of them plus one extra maid, formed a ring. In the game, there wasn’t any need to form a ring like this, but when they stood in this circle there was no mistaking it: This was definitely Diablo’s party.

He focused his consciousness on the Angel’s Plume, much like when he used his magic.

—*Teleport us, to Zircon Tower!*

He summoned the image of the tower made of gemstones in his mind.

†

The teleportation worked, of course.

After gathering information in town, they set out to the battlefield; Rem and the girls aboard a sand ship, and Diablo with his flight magic. Once they arrived, the hostilities had already begun, and it seemed the races were on the brink of defeat. Countless sand ships had fallen into a ravine apparently created by magic, and the remaining forces could only scream in the face of the Fallen onslaught, unable to offer any sort of organized resistance.

Observing the battle from above, Diablo began weaving his spells.

“Lightning Meteor!!!”

Countless bolts of lightning rained down on the Fallen army,

burning them to the ground. Them being grouped together only increased the effectiveness of the spell.

But he couldn't easily use his magic where the two forces crashed in melee combat. In the game, magic attacks only affected enemies, but, in this world, it wouldn't make that distinction, blowing away friend and foe alike.

"I can leave that place to them."

A Summon clad in white light charged through the battlefield. It was a huge bull with three horns, significantly strengthened by its master's new equipment.

"Go forth, Asulau!" Rem cried out, spurring her Summon on.

Asulau rammed itself against a Fallen, caught in the chaos of battle.

"Gaha!?"

The Fallen, which had a lion's head, was blown away. That alone hadn't done enough damage to finish it off, but they were in a tumultuous battlefield; there were many warriors from the races' side around. They swung down their swords and axes on the toppled Fallen, striking him like hoes against farmland.

"Gaaah!? Fools, you! Just...weak humans... You dare...!?"

"Yeah, us humans sure are weak! That's why we gotta gang up whenever we see a shitty Fallen like you down on the ground!"

"A...gah... Stop!"

A blow strong enough to crush the Fallen's lion-shaped head reduced its body to particles of light.

Fallen and magical beasts turned into light and disappeared when they died. This was the most striking difference between them and other wild beasts and monsters.

"Next one is the Fallen that looks like a bear! Let's go!" Rem called out.

"Yes, ma'am!" the soldiers responded in unison.

She was an adventurer who popped out of nowhere—and a Pantherian woman at that—but her sound judgment and wise directions bought her the soldiers' subservience easily. And with each time she threw herself into battle, more and more soldiers came under her command. Having enhanced Summons capable of felling Large-class magical beasts, and several MP potions, helped her greatly. Rem gradually regained control of the chaotic battlefield.

A large magical beast in the shape of a carnivorous beast swooped down from the sky, the breadth of its outspread wings reaching ten meters.

"Gyaaaaaa!!!" the beast screeched.

“Take a 《Triangle Shot》!” A girl’s shrill voice echoed.

Three arrows struck the creature simultaneously, each of them being a Tempest Arrow capable of penetrating the magical beast’s considerable physical defense. If it dealt damage, there was a chance petrification would trigger, with the probability tripling since three arrows would hit it.

The massive magical beast instantly turned to stone, fell in accordance to gravity, and shattered against the ground, turning into specks of light.

Shera had attacked it using her new, special arrows. She had run along the tops of the sand ships, hopping from the sails as if they were treetops, and sniping down magical beasts one after another with superior skill. The sight of her was dignified and beautiful; so much so, a rumor began spreading among the soldiers she saved from distress that “A goddess saved us.”

A large group of soldiers rushed through the battlefield, regrouping with a squad of fellow combatants.

“We’re here to help!”

“Appreciated, boys! Ah, wait, weren’t you just carried over to the medical tent...?”

“Yeah, but can you believe it? Apparently the High Priest healed us!”

“When you were *that* injured!? Holy smokes!”

The healing miracle had done more than just mend the soldiers’ wounds; it gave them the confidence that, even if they were to be injured, someone would be there to heal them.

Zircon Tower’s church was closed, and there was a great deal of distrust toward the priests because of their demands for donations. Yet many soldiers still relied on religion to support their hearts. And now the Church’s pride, the beloved High Priest, had come to their aid. There could be no greater support for them.

Their fear from the Demon Lord’s army waned, and reinforcements allowed them to quell the fighting around them, tipping the scales in their favor.

There was one part of the battlefield where something unusual had happened...

All the units belonging to the Demon Lord’s army were suddenly eliminated. It happened so swiftly that no fighting actually took place. The corpses of the Fallen and their magical beasts were reduced to light and disappeared, leaving no trace they were ever there to begin with. A lone girl stood there, wearing what looked like a maid’s outfit that was open in the back.

The Magimatic Maid, Rose, surveyed the skies with her emerald eyes.

“Aaah, Master... Master is so wonderful! Seeing Master lord above the battle in the heavens, raining down judgment and lightning on all who oppose Master! Truly, the splitting image of a Demon Lord! Behold, all you fools crawling on the ground! That is a true Demon Lord, Rose’s esteemed Master!”

“This woman... Who...!? Small...weak... Eat her!!!”

A Fallen with an amphibian’s head bore down on her; there were three more Fallen as well. They each had the heads of warriors they had killed dangling from their belts, as if taking pride in a collection. It was a gruesome sight that would surely produce a scream from any ordinary girl, but Rose directed a look of pure displeasure toward them for having gotten in the way of her entranced “Diablo appreciation time.”

“You dumb, foolish frog... You dare get in the way of Rose’s reverent worship of Master!”

A thick tongue extended from the amphibian Fallen’s mouth, coiling around Rose and binding her in place.

“Her, eat!”

“Your disgusting Fallen stench is sticking to the lovely clothes Master gave Rose... How do you intend to compensate for this? You are the only one Rose will not grant the mercy of a quick death. Asterismos!”

A giant double-bladed sword appeared behind Rose. Having seen it, the Fallen didn’t pause or seemed surprised, for when it came to battle, the Fallen never hesitated, never faltered, and never showed mercy.

Seeing the giant sword, and mechanical hand that wielded it, the four Fallen went on the offensive, charging at it.

“Heh... Heheh... Hahahahaha! You would challenge Rose with such paltry strength!?” Rose laughed excitedly. “For how big your bodies are, your brains are so tiny they must rattle in your thick skulls! Rose will carve the true meaning of horror into your bones! Now accept your deaths! 《Dídymos》, 《Karkinos》, 《Leon》, 《Parthenos》!!!”

She invoked the constellations, chanting their names in song. The double-bladed sword danced through the air, as if tracing the positions of the stars.

It cut through the Fallen’s skin, thick enough to deflect the weapons of the races, and shattered their bones. The Fallens’ eyes, keen enough to see bullets zipping through the air, couldn’t follow the blade’s trajectory. Their bodies could regenerate lost limbs, but they disintegrated into particles of light before they even had a chance to.

No fighting had actually taken place here. The only way it could be described was an act of cleaning and sweeping done by the Magimatic Maid Rose.

Low-tier Fallen had no way of opposing a girl capable of effortlessly subjugating even a Large-class dragon.

Looking at the now empty battlefield, Rose heaved an exasperated sigh. “Ah, Rose cannot believe herself... Rose intended to punish the insolent Fallen, but they died before Rose could do that. Rose is such a careless maid... Rose must grow out of this habit or Master might become angry with Rose.”



The tides of battle were shifting. In terms of which army claimed the most kills, the Demon Lord's army greatly surpassed the races. But from the beginning, the races' army was over one hundred times the Fallen's army in size. The Demon Lord's army numbered 300, but by now their numbers were reduced to half. In contrast, the races' army still had 30,000 troops in fighting condition.

The turmoil was dying down and the battle was slowly coming under the races' control. Troops were being rescued from the sunken sand ships and reorganized into units.

Diablo descended to the sand ship that stood at the vanguard of the fleet. The boots he had equipped, 《Empty Sky's Gambol》, had a flight enchantment to them. It did consume his MP, though, and he greatly preferred to conserve his MP if he could.

But he did spot a familiar face on the ship...

—*So this was her ship!?*

"I see you're still alive, governor of Zircon Tower." Stifling his surprise, Diablo spoke as if he knew all along.

"Our name is Laminitus."

The wound in her flank demanded immediate medical attention. An HP potion could close the wound, but it wouldn't recover the blood she had lost. Losing this much would leave her in a state of anemia.

Her face was deathly pale. Diablo had to applaud her willpower enabling her to stand up to him even when she's this wounded.

"We appreciate the assistance..." Laminitus said, pointing at the enemy forces. "But don't let your guard down! The battle is far from over!"

"What?"

"The enemy's commander is the Demon Lord's Army's commander-in-chief, Varakness. We shot him in the heart and the bugged still wouldn't die. He also has a powerful Sorcerer and Healer under his command, as well as a Fallen assassin who can strike from within people's own shadows!"

Diablo nodded. "Have no fear, I assumed this much. I'll admit that huge magic could be troublesome, but..."

Diablo fixed his gaze in the direction Laminitus pointed, finding the shape of a Large-class, turtle-like magical beast. A young man dressed in a tuxedo reclined on a sofa fixed on the turtle's massive back. His bat-like wings were particularly conspicuous, and his arms were wrapped around a woman with raven wings.

—Huh...?

Diablo's body went stiff. There was also a Fallen woman with a lizard's tail, her face rubbing so close to the young man's it looked like they would kiss at any second. Another Fallen woman, this time one that looked like a mermaid, stood next to them with a blush on her face as the male Fallen—Diablo doubted his eyes—was fondling her plump breasts.

Diablo couldn't, for the life of him, wrap his mind around what he was seeing. He simply couldn't believe it.

"This is... This isn't happening..." Diablo hardly recognized the hoarse voice coming out of his lips as his own.

Fondling. Her. Breasts.

Then he saw the silver rings on their fingers.

—*Wedding rings!?*

A couple...

There was no mistaking it: They were a couple. A lovey-dovey, sappy couple, making out in front of his eyes in broad daylight.

Diablo's mind went completely blank. He could hear someone laughing, but who was it?

After a moment, Diablo realized he himself was the one laughing.

"Hehe... Ha... Hahaha... Hahahahahahaha..."

"Wh-What is it? What's wrong with you, Diablo?" Laminitus took a step back.

Was the expression on his face really that frightening? Diablo couldn't tell; all he knew was that a black emotion was surging and swirling in his chest.

Unconsciously, he reached into his pouch and took out a special potion. It was a booster-type potion that temporarily increased his magic power. He gulped it all down in one go, and his magical energy strengthened up to its utmost limit.

Diablo ordered the staff in his hand, the 《Tonnerre Empereur》, to transform. The top of the black staff clicked open, like a pair of scissors, and purple lightning ran through the parted staff, extending into a blade of plasma.

It had become a broadsword of pure light.

"What is wrong with you, Diablo!? Tell Us!" Laminitus pressed him for an answer again, feeling the horrifying atmosphere that surrounded him.

"I'm fine... It's all good."

"It certainly does not seem that way to Us."

Diablo had no idea what expression his face wore right now, so all he did was tell the person who had just spoken to him what he was

going to do.

“I’m gonna go kill him real quick.”

“Wha!?”

Pouring MP into Empty Sky’s Gambol, Diablo took off, flying faster than ever before since his magical power had been boosted. Diablo charged at the large magical beast, zipping through the air like a bullet.

The Fallen youth, Varakness, rose to his feet. “My, aren’t you terribly aggressive? And from the looks of it, you’re a pure Sorcerer, yet you challenge us to a melee battle...”

The magical beast, which served as their headquarters, was guarded by other flying magical beasts. Diablo brandished his broadsword of light, the Tonnerre Empereur, at the beasts, chanting as he did.

“Lightning Arrow!”

The sword’s special effect kicked in, firing the spell seven times in succession.

Between the flight magic, the broadsword of light, and the spell being cast seven times over, Diablo’s MP was depleting fast, so he pulled a MP potion from his pouch and replenished it immediately.

To hell with efficiency—the cost of things was no longer a consideration.

—Utter destruction! The greatest magic possible! Thorough, merciless, unadulterated annihilation!

Lightning Arrow covered the sky over the large magical beast, wiping out the smaller ones guarding it and reducing them to grains of light.

Varakness’s face froze in shock.

“Who is this Sorcerer...!?”

†

“I...will!”

The lizard-woman-sorceress stood beside Varakness, and unleashed her spell again, screaming in a shrill voice.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!”

It was quite the special chant.

Diablo smirked.

—Awww, you want to fight while holding hands and cooperating? You smug show-offs!

It appeared to be some type of unique earth element spell. It threw a small, palm-sized pebble at the opponent at the speed of sound.

The spell the Fallen woman had used was low level, but packed a powerful punch. It was probably the level 70 spell, 《Sling Diamond》. When the races used it, the stone moved far more slowly.

—*It hardly matters, either way.*

The Demon Lord's Ring activated, reflecting any and all spells. The moment it was about to impact with Diablo, the pebble bounced back to the caster. The lizard woman was a pure Sorcerer with no means to evade or defend herself.

A fist-sized hole opened in her slim torso.

“Kha!?” Her eyes widened as she coughed up green blood.

“What...just...?”

Varakness stood next to her, utterly shocked.

“Aaah... Va...rak...” Mouthing his name, the lizard woman burst into specks of light and disappeared.

The mermaid-like Fallen also called out what was apparently his name.

Diablo landed on the large magical beast's back, a distance of ten steps between him and his opponent.

They were in close quarters combat range. Sorcerers would usually be at a disadvantage, but when Diablo fought seriously, he preferred fighting like this, even against opponents who excelled at melee combat.

The shadow at Diablo's feet stirred and distorted as a taloned hand burst out of it.

“How dare you! You killed my sister! Now I'll kill you!!!” the raven-winged Fallen woman screeched.

Her attack had almost reached Diablo's throat, but he dodged, moving his head only slightly and catching his assailant by the wrist at the same time.

He activated a spell that required contact with the target.

“Everything shall vanish...into a world of complete stillness...《Absolute Zero》.”

“Heeh!?”

Starting from where Diablo had touched her, the Fallen woman's body began freezing over.

“N-No, I don't... I don't want to disappear! I don't want to die... Save me...” she begged, her eyes wide in terror.

“Oh, that reminds me... Weren't you the one who said, ‘If you didn't want to die, all you had to was never be born at all?’”

“Don't kill me!”

“A bit too late for that.”

The effect of 《Tonnerre Empereur: Libre》 had stacked seven Absolute Zeros on her.

He was impressed, even if she was a Fallen. She was able to resist a spell that would usually freeze the target in a second long enough to beg for her life.

The raven-winged Fallen woman turned into a statue of translucent ice, with only her upper half coming out of Diablo's shadow. After a moment, she, too, turned into particles of light and faded away.

"Is this a joke...? Batutta was harder to beat than these bozos..." Diablo whispered under his breath.

The mermaid Fallen seemed to be screaming something, but her voice was so small Diablo couldn't make it out. Then, she threw up her hands. Was she casting a spell? Or maybe using some unique skill?

Varakness threw up a hand of his own, stopping her.

"Stop. This man has the ability to deflect magic. If you cast your special water magic, it would result in nothing but your own death."

—Oooh. So he could tell by seeing it just the once, huh...

Varakness' movements were elegant, especially at a time like this.

"I never imagined two of my wives would be defeated like this... You are not just another run-of-the-mill Sorcerer of the races, are you?"

"Quite the composure you have there, lady-killer. Better keep a good eye on your third girl, then... Burst forth, incandescent scorching flames: Flare Burst."

"What are you...?" Varakness's expression finally changed.

The explosion of seven stacked Flare Bursts burned even the large magical beast's shell to ashes. The creature let out a cry of pain, and the shell that served as its back began shaking.

The red sofa the man and his wives made out on was reduced to nothing, and as it was, Diablo consumed yet another MP potion, replenishing the very amount he had just lost.

†

The smoke cleared. Only Varakness remained on top of the magical beast's ruined shell as the mermaid Fallen faded away in his arms. He glared at Diablo angrily, his eyes shining a deep red.

"Why!? Why did you involve her!?"

"Such a stupid question. What's so wrong about attacking the opponent when they're right in front of you? Besides, taking out the Healer first is basic strategy."

"Curse you! Curse you! I swear on everything, I will end your life myself!!!"

Varakness kicked the ground, closing the distance between him and Diablo in the blink of an eye.

—So, he's a *melee type*, as expected.

Diablo devoted all his concentration to avoiding the blow coming his way. Using the sword to intercept Varakness wasn't an option.

Tonnerre Empereur: Libre functioned as a powerful broadsword, but he only equipped it for the septuple spellcasting effect. He wasn't foolish enough to try and match a close-combat warrior with a weapon he was inexperienced with.

"How!? How did you dodge that!? Thanks to the Demon Lord's blessing, I now surpass the power of the races! My power should be equivalent to level 160!"

"Your equipment sucks."

"What...!?"

"I don't know what Demon Lord gave you power, but...elevating your level to the maximum is the obvious, easy part. But there are other factors that determine strength, like what equipment you're using. The other factor is technique, like reaction speed and your ability to assess situations. Those are what decide battles."

"Impossible... What... What are you saying!?"

"You still don't get it, do you? That's the kind of world I came from. Fallen who have no experience fighting other max level characters can't ever hope to match me."

"Shut up! I just have to hit you! If I could only land one hit on you! Just one!"

Diablo dodged the fist flying his way, and the next one, and the one after that.

"All right...that's enough. About time we finish this."

"What!?"

"Once you get a taste of this, you'll probably never think of attacking a town of the races again. Not that you'll be in any condition to be thinking, anyway..."

He pulled a 《Phantom Gemstone》 out of his pouch and used it. Its effect allowed one to evade a single target's attack once, without fail. This gave him the time needed to cast his spell.

"Brilliant white! Sublimate all through light and incandescence, and reduce all to an ivory void! 《White Nova》 !!!"

Diablo opened his arms and a sphere of light, the size of a ping-pong ball, manifested just above the palm of his hand. He threw it at the ground, or rather, at the large magical beast beneath them. The moment the ball of light touched the shell—

A flash of white filled the battlefield. The thunderous explosion struck Diablo's eardrums mercilessly and his eyesight was filled with blinding white light.

"I-Impossible..." Varakness lay on the sandy ground, his lips

crumbling as he spoke. "Everything's...gone!"

"And you're still alive..."

Diablo stood beside Varakness, looking down on him. Diablo was surprised.

—*So, this is the endurance of a Fallen powered up by a Demon Lord...*

Laminitus had said he "wouldn't die," and, true to those words, he was still alive after having a White Nova cast on him seven consecutive times. Every other Fallen and magical beast in the spell's AoE were gone without a trace, completely and utterly wiped out. But Varakness was still alive, and even rose to his feet.

"Curse you... Curse you!!!" he screamed, his eyes burning a brilliant red. "I'll never forgive you! Never!"

"To think you would make the Demon Lord use his full power... Take pride. You have, without a doubt, come close to my limit."

"How dare you use that title! You are not the Demon Lord!"

Varakness extended his arm. It stretched far beyond its normal length, attempting to gorge Diablo's neck.

"What?"

"《Energy Drain》!"

"Hmph... So that's your ace in the hole? That's a pretty boring hidden talent you've got there."

Diablo swept the Tonnerre Empereur: Libre sideways, the magical broadsword cutting through Varakness's body.

"Gaaah... Ghu... S-Such power... B-But still! The Demon Lord, is stronger!"

"Heh, it doesn't matter what Demon Lord you revive. The true Demon Lord, Diablo, will trample them all!"

The weapon's effect magnified the slash, cutting him seven times over. Reduced to a shape that made it hard to believe he was ever humanoid, Varakness turned to particles of light and faded away. The hand that gripped Diablo's throat also broke apart into light and disappeared. What remained of the Demon Lord's army fled, abandoning all semblance of rank and file.

Diablo turned around, finding the soldiers cheering at their victory, though few of them really understood what had just happened. But they all understood just one thing perfectly well: The enemy army was decimated.

Diablo drank yet another MP potion, and began walking toward the soldiers who celebrated and cheered their victory.

Epilogue

“Diabloooooo! You were amazing!” Shera ran toward him from the west, the setting sun at her back.

“He was weaker than I thought.” Diablo nodded with an expression spelling out that this victory was the obvious result.

“That sparkly light was amazing! All the Fallen disappeared, all ‘whoosh’ like!”

“I could perform that type of magic at any time, if I had the supplies for it. It’s just that, until now, I had to conserve my resources.”

Diablo’s treasure vault contained a nearly limitless supply of different types of potions. He even had stocks of potions he made for practice when he raised his skill in the Combiner subclass. He wouldn’t have to worry about running low for the foreseeable future.

“Really!? That’s amazing! You’re so cool, Diablo!”

Shera hugged Diablo’s arm. Her soft swellings pressed against him, making a desire to touch them with his hand spring forth. But there was no way he could give in to his carnal desires and fondle a girl’s breasts. Not if he hoped to keep their relationship as is.

He hardened his heart and resisted the temptation, crying bitter tears in his mind all the while. If she wasn’t right before his eyes, he wouldn’t have to suffer these terrible urges...

Unaware of Diablo’s inner conflict, Shera continued showering him with praise, her soft breasts rubbing up against him.

Boing~ boing~

Rem burst unto the scene.

“Diablo! There’s trouble!”

“Huh?”

She didn’t seem to be rejoicing over their victory. Instead, her face was pale with anxiety.

“Please hurry, over here!”

Led by Rem, Diablo and his group rushed to the edge of the battlefield. Standing alone in the empty field was the still, solitary figure of a girl. She stood unmoving, like a statue. She wouldn’t smile or turn her gaze toward them.

“...R-Rose...won’t respond...” Rem said, her voice shivering. “She’s not breathing...and not...moving...”

“No way! But she beat them so easily! Easy as pie!” Shera looked to be on the verge of tears.

Diablo drew closer to Rose, who was as still as a real doll.

“What happened to you, Rose...?”

—*Will you never look at me, never smile at me again...? What made this happen... Is it because I took you out of the dungeon...?*

“Piiipiii! Effective proximity with the Master confirmed. Deactivating sleep mode. Current charge at 15%.”

Rose, who was as still as mannequin, blinked a few times.

“Ah, Rose sees you’re done. Spectacular job, Master.” She smiled broadly.

“What...? Rose, just now... What happened to you?”

“Rose was nearly out of magical energy, so Rose entered magic saver mode. So long as Rose isn’t in the Master’s base, or in the vicinity of Master himself, Rose will not be able to recharge magical energy. There is a faster method of replenishing Rose’s magical energy, but...”

“I thought the Demon Lord’s army had gotten to you...”

“Hehe... Rose is Master’s Magimatic Maid. Weaklings like them could never hope to match Rose. However, Rose will admit that Rose failed to properly calculate the rate of magical energy consumption going into combat mode would entail.”

“Don’t worry me like that.”

“Rose begs Master’s pardon. Causing Master concern was not Rose’s intent. But knowing Master was worried for Rose’s well-being fills Rose with such joy... Rose fears Rose’s inner circuits would overheat and short circuit...” she said, a pink blush on her cheeks.

—*How much grief will this mechanical girl cause me...*

“It’s not just me... Rem and Shera were worried about you, too.”

“Worried...about Rose?” She looked at the other girls quizzically.

“...I’m glad,” Rem said, wiping a tear. “It seems...you’re fine now...”

“Whoooooooooaa, I thought you died, Rooose!” Shera tried hugging Rose, but the maid pushed her back with an arm.

“What are you doing? Only Master may touch Rose. Rose guarantees Rose hasn’t fallen so far to warrant your concern.”

“...That’s right,” Rem said, nodding with a smile. “I’m glad to see you’re still your old self.”

“Booo...”

Shera, still seemingly full of the urge to hug someone, tottered over to Diablo and pressed her breasts against his arm once more. That would probably be enough to buy Rose’s ire, but...

Diablo shrugged and told the girls they're heading back to Zircon Tower.

—I'm just glad they're all fine.

Relief filled Diablo's heart knowing the three who joined him on the front lines were all well.



The rearguard of the battlefield—

Lumachina was tending to the wounded. The fighting had ended, but it was now that things would become the busiest on this front. There were many heavily wounded soldiers only Lumachina could treat.

"Forgive me, Lord Diablo." Lumachina lowered her head, in a tired gesture. "I do not think I'll be able to break away from this for a while..."

"Hm, so it seems. You needn't concern yourself with me. Let me know if you need anything. If it's something from my vault, I could have it delivered to you."

"Thank you very much... Oh, and by the way, once things calm down here, I'll be using the town's chapel. I want to purge the Death Knell disease from the townspeople."

"Did you discuss it with Laminitus?"

The chapel was closed by order of the governor, Laminitus. She had also warned the rent for it would be extremely high.

"Not yet." Lumachina shook her head. "But there is no other place we could use... I will ask her later."

"In that case, I'll talk to her as well."

"...Right." Rem nodded at Diablo's words. "I think we we all worked hard in this war, even if not as much as Diablo. I'm sure we'll get permission to use the chapel."

"Yep yep!" Shera agreed.

"Should she refuse the Master's request, Rose will..." Rose began, a thin, chilling smile on her lips.

"...That would only complicate things. Please keep these...methods for the right time, place, or person, if you could," Rem said warningly.

Rose glared at her. It looked like they weren't going to begin getting along well so quickly, even though they fought back-to-back on the battlefield...

"Ah, so this is where you were."

A voice greeted them. It was just the person they were discussing: the governor, Laminitus.

Diablo didn't expect to see her here.

“What? Did you come here for healing?”

“True, We didn’t get away from the fighting unscathed... But this is the tent for treating the common soldiers. We came to inspect the place and encourage Our men. It’s thanks to everyone here that Zircon Tower is safe.”

“Hmph...” He didn’t know she was this devoted.

“Though it goes without saying that the greatest achievements were yours.”

She fixed her gaze on Diablo. Honestly, it was pretty embarrassing for him.

“H-Hmph. Do not mistake my intentions! I merely taught these fools who dared assume the name of the Demon Lord’s army the power of the true Demon Lord, Diablo! I did not do this to save a town of the races.”

“Heh... We see. Well, that’s as good a reason as any. But your motives aside, would you reject Our offer to grant you Our hospitality?”

“Hm? Hospitality?”

“Yay! Food, food! Hot, tasty food!” Shera cheered, raising both hands in the air. She was so happy she looked like she would break into a song and dance.

Come to think of it, they hadn’t eaten anything since that meal they prepared in the dungeon.

“Very well.” Laminitus smiled wryly. “Zircon Tower will put all the energy it can spare to provide you with the finest meal.”

“Yayyy!”

It seemed they would have to take part in the victory banquet, and Diablo couldn’t think of any reason to refuse.

“...Hmm, we would actually like to consult with you regarding the chapel,” Rem said, raising her hand.

“Oh?”

“...We’ve brought back the treasure capable of lifting the Death Knell disease. We would like to store it in a place where it would be open to the public. Could you please let us use the chapel for a reasonable fee? This is a request from the High Priest, too.”

Laminitus fixed her gaze on Lumachina, who was still busy treating the wounded soldiers. The other priests were doing the same.

Laminitus shook her head. “We refuse.”

“...Why!?”

“We cannot demand a fee from those who have done our city such a service. We could never thank you or the High Priest enough. You are free to use the chapel as you will, with no charge. If there are any sections in need of maintenance or repair, We will do what We can to have them serviced.”

The priests raised their voices with a pleased, “Oh!” Lumachina brought her hands together, giving thanks to God and the governor. The injured soldiers and medical staff joined the priests in offering prayer.

“You’ve mellowed out quite a bit, Laminitus,” Diablo said calmly.

“Ha!” She shrugged. “Not being able to adapt to situations is the mark of a fool. With the Demon Lord awakened, everyone from every corner of the kingdom would need to cooperate. Otherwise, forget Zircon Tower, the entire dominion of the races would be decimated. Fixing a chapel is a small price to pay, if it would improve Our relations with the Church. That is all there is to it.”

“Heh... Well, I suppose we can leave it at that.”

“Wha...!? H-Hmph. I could say the same to you. You’re entirely different from how you were back then!”

“Back when?”

“When you were facing off with Varakness. For a second there, We honestly believed you actually were the Demon Lord. That’s how menacing your expression was.”

All the blood had gone to his head and he frankly didn’t remember. Was he really that different now, though?

“There’s no need for you to know the reason to that,” Diablo said, turning his head and averting his gaze from her.

—*Who cares if I did it out of jealousy, as long as the Fallen were beaten in the end, right?*

Laminitus’s aide had entered and called for her. She had other business to attend to, but told Diablo and his friends to head to Zircon Tower’s plaza come nightfall.



That evening, in Zircon Tower’s plaza—

A lavish victory feast was held to commemorate the day’s events. They had used rations, usually kept for times of crisis, to prepare it.

Diablo and his companions found, to their surprise, that their seats were right beside Laminitus herself. The governor had yet to make an appearance, but once she had, the festivities would begin in earnest.

To the right of the governor’s seat sat the officers, and to the left were adventurers and representatives of the church. The table was set up as such.

Diablo sat at the top of the left side.

—*You can’t have me sit in a spot that stands out like this! I’m a shut-in; is she trying to give me a heart attack!?*

Rose stood behind Diablo, as she didn’t need to ingest food. In

fact, she was currently recharging her magical energy by being near Diablo, so it could be said she was currently in the middle of a meal...in a manner of speaking.

Sitting to his left were Rem, Shera, and Lumachina, in that order. One other seat was empty.

“Where’s Horn?” Diablo asked.

“I recall her helping out with treating the wounded...” Lumachina replied, her head tilted curiously.

“She was in the plaza, too, though I think she was rather hesitant when it was time to get on stage.”

—I don’t want to be in such a conspicuous place any more than she does!

Declining after they’d come to the party would look lame, so he took the seat.

“Didn’t she seem kinda troubled, though?”

“...Now that you mention it, she did.”

Diablo didn’t notice anything odd about Horn.

He rose to his feet. “I’m going to get some fresh air.”

“I’m going to get some fresh air.”

“I’ll come, t—”

Diablo raised a hand, stopping Rem and the others from getting up. If everyone were gone, Laminitus would take it the wrong way.

“...You’re right.” Rem nodded. “We have the matter with the chapel to consider. Making sure we’re in good standing with the governor and the officers is an important job, too.”

“Oh, I see.” Lumachina nodded. She was, as it turned out, rather ignorant when it came to the subtleties of politics.

“I’ll make sure to eat extra for your share, Diablo!” Shera said, her eyes not leaving the food once.

“At least bring some over to my room, okay?”

He left the platform.

—Not being in the center of attention is such a relief!

“Horn? Horn? Come on out.”

Calling her like she was a cat in hiding wouldn’t make her come out.

Diablo’s stroll led him down an alley. The main road was bustling with the festivities. Having gone from utter hopelessness to a great victory, the townspeople were overjoyed.

—She’d probably steer clear of all that...

If Horn was troubled, she’d look for someplace quiet.

“Maybe the inn?”

He returned to the inn Laminitus had prepared for them. He found the Shadow Knife there, alongside the enchanted cloak, accessories,

and HP potions. Those were all things Diablo had given her. The sole exception was the Treasure Mini. And even her share of the money the governor had rewarded them for their service in the battle was left behind.

“What is she thinking?”

—*Did she leave all her adventuring equipment behind and leave?*

No, it didn't seem so. There would be no reason for her to remove the accessories. Even if she left with her old dagger, why leave the Shadow Knife behind?

—*Maybe she's not planning on coming back...?*

Diablo clicked his tongue. If she wanted to leave, then he shouldn't stop her...

That's what went through Diablo's mind. People leaving him behind always left Diablo rattled and traumatized. His heart was too hurt, too fragile, to go after her.

“But if there's anything to say before we say goodbye, I should talk to her face-to-face...no matter how painful it is.”

—*I won't repeat the same mistakes I made that time Shera was about to leave!*

Diablo rushed out of the inn. The sun had already set, and he could hear the sounds of cups clinking against each other in the plaza as people raised toasts in celebration.

†

“Ow!”

Diablo heard what sounded like Horn's voice. While it wasn't as keen as Shera's, his earring was far better than the common man's. It came from an empty pot, where materials for war were gathered. Diablo peeked in from behind the wooden boxes.

Horn!

She'd fallen on her backside, looking up anxiously.

It seemed a group of four Pantherians had picked a fight with her. If he recalled correctly, it was the gang Horn had been arguing with about her compensation from exploring a dungeon when Diablo and the group had first met her.

One of them was particularly well-built and had a 《Red Sword》 sheathed on his waist.

“Hey there, little Horn. Never knew you were a chick all along~”

“Ugh...”

“We were in the war, too, y'know. Didn't run into very strong Fallen, though. I figured this war would last a while, but it ended so quickly... So we got all this pent-up energy and nowhere to cut loose.

And we're kinda short on friths, too. You follow?"

"Is that right..."

"But I was surprised, y'know? A chicken like you in the heroes' party... That's a joke for the ages, I tell ya. But hey, we're lucky here, and I'm not gonna let that luck pass me by. You got a fat reward, didn't ya?"

"I did...but I left it for everyone else."

"Stop lyin', you suck at it. C'mon, give us a little somethin'. Haven't we always been lookin' out for ya? Show us how grateful ya are. With cash."

"Even if we go on the same adventure...it's totally different."

"Huuuh?"

"Going on an adventure with them was fun! Even if all I did was get in everyone's way, it was so much fun! All I do is mess everything up and can't help at all, but... They're all so...so amazing!"

Horn's eyes were wet with tears. The Pantherian tilted his head in confusion.

"The hell's gotten into ya? We're short on time here, so leave your blabberin' for later. There won't be any seats left at the tavern at this rate."

"Who cares about your level being 80! You're not even half of what Shera is!"

"Well then."

The Pantherians' attitudes swiftly turned darker. They went from being flippantly mocking to outright hostile. Even nobodies like them were still adventurers, so their animosity was still rather intimidating.

"I won't..." Horn said, drawing her cheap dagger from its scabbard, "I won't let you scare me into doing what you want anymore!"

"I think you've got somethin' wrong, Hornie..."

"What...?"

"I'm willin' to bet ya chickened out after seeing how much they're praisin' ya after ya did diddly squat, and ran away. You should be in the festivities now, shouldn't you? Head of the table and all that."

"Uuu..."

Horn faltered. That pigheaded strike against her confidence shattered what little courage she managed to muster.

The Pantherians laughed loudly.

"Do ya really belong there, though? A skulking little coward like you has no place with the big heroes! I can fill in for ya if ya want! Go on, go and introduce me to 'em!"

The Pantherians mocked her, saying anything that came to their minds.

"Did you see that cute little one with the black hair? I think she's

a good fit for ya, man!” “Ya know what? I was thinkin’ the same thing!” “That Elf chick was amazin’, too! Never knew there were Elves with boobs that big...” “The only letdown is the High Priest. She’s a looker, but damn does she look like a borin’, stuffy broad...”

Their leader shrugged. “That’s the thing, see? Wasn’t that party all the High Priest’s lackeys? Guess they piggybacked offa her, and that’s how they made their ‘big contribution.’”

—It’s probably about time I showed myself..

He felt like if he heard another word coming out of their mouths he’d lose it. But just when Diablo was about to move—
Horn shouted at them.

“Take that back!”

“You take that back!” she cried out again, gripping her dagger. “Don’t you dare mock my...my...my companions! They’re all super awesome, you got that!? They all worked so hard to protect this town! They’re not narrow-minded hacks like you, that only ever got points by showing up at easy battles at the right time!”

The Pantherian man nodded a few times. “Right. So, I guess we’ll remember those as your last words, then. ‘Cuz tomorrow mornin’, they’re gonna find you bobbin’ in a pond, ya dig?”

The other three Pantherians giggled.

“Oh boy, bro’s really out for your blood now.”

“Ya just killed yourself, Hornie. Got yourself killed with a capital ‘K.’”

“For now, cough up those coins. I might let ya off the hook if ya do.”

Horn didn’t falter.

“If I don’t fight after you trash-talked my companions...I’ll never be able to forgive myself!”

“Ya dumb little shit! Who cares if ya can’t forgive yourself when I won’t forgive ya! Die, ya stupid twerp!”

The Pantherian pulled out his Red Sword, cinders rising from it as it left its scabbard. He brandished the longsword over his head, and...

Diablo repressed his desire to walk in on the fight. He wanted to believe in Horn.

A slash ran through the air. Horn strafed horizontally, dodging it.

“Ah!”

A dagger cut into the Pantherian’s hand.

A direct hit.

A bit of blood splattered to the ground. The Pantherian took a few steps back.

“Shit, that hurts! Ya dumb runt! Who said you’re allowed to cut

me like that!”

—*Good one!*

Diablo pumped his fist.

“What’re ya just standin’ there for!?” the Pantherian shouted at his friends. “Pin this pipsqueak to the ground! I’ll finish her off, like we always do!”

—*Did they actually manage to level up with that setup?*

Even if Horn fought as valiantly as she could, she’d never win with these four to one odds stacked against her.

Not to mention she was up against buff Pantherians, too. In terms of physical strength, they ranked highly among the races.

They pressed down on Horn, pinning her to the ground. The Pantherian with the injured hand smiled vulgarly.

“You did it now, Hornie. I’m gonna strip ya naked and shove this sword up your ass. Hey, boys, we should place bets on how deep it’ll go before she croaks.”

Diablo walked in, stepping on the ground loudly as he did.

“This is quite the stench. You scumbags smell like monsters to me.”

The Pantherians turned their glares in Diablo’s direction. He stepped out from the cover of the wooden boxes, revealing himself.

“I thought you’d know better than to walk the streets after nightfall, Horn. Don’t you know monsters can get the jump on you, even in town?”

“B-Boss! Why are you...!?”

The men shouted.

“Aren’t ya from the hero party!?”

“Tsk, whatever! Let’s just waste this guy and get his prize money! We can snag that cute, black-furred girl while we’re at it!”

“Is how it goes. We can’t just let ya walk away after ya saw us.”

Diablo approached the Pantherian with the Red Sword in his hand. He snickered vulgarly, his tongue dabbling from his mouth.

“Look at the ‘big hero.’ You’re a Sorcerer, ain’t ya? Ya got no chance of winning once you’re this up close with a level 80 warrior.”

He swung the sword, but Diablo caught it with a bare hand.

“Compared to a level 160 Warrior-type Fallen, you’re far too slow and incredibly weak. It’s like I’m fighting a child. Pathetic.”

The armor he had equipped now, the 《Gigantes Mail》, was focused on exponentially increasing his physical stats. He’d decided that, in this world, it would probably be a wise choice to wear it. Right before his eyes was a situation that proved that hypothesis.

The Pantherian panicked when he noticed Diablo had caught his

sword.

“Wh-What? How!? Let go! Let go of it! Why won’t it cut you!?”

—*Because I have the 《Monarch’s Bangle》 equipped, and it cuts all damage below a certain threshold to zero. Catching a blade with my fingers won’t even cause any injury now.*

“What’s this? Having trouble against ‘the High Priest’s lackey’?”

“Ugh! Stop mocking me... Don’t just stand there! Take him out!”

The Pantherians holding Horn down rushed at Diablo, drawing their swords.

“Oooh!” “We’ll kill ya!” “Die!”

“Since you’re so keen on killing me, that means you’re prepared to be killed yourselves, right?”

Diablo chanted his magic, and the vacant lot was instantaneously frozen in ice.

†

Diablo headed back to the inn carrying Horn, who was still too frightened to stand, on his back.

“Don’t get used to it. I’m only doing this once.”

“A-all right... I get it. So, um... Why were you there?”

“It’s because I was looking for you. That much should be obvious.”

“For me!? But the feast is going on right now...”

—*Like I could ever eat peacefully with everyone looking at me on the stage...*

Diablo didn’t know how Horn interpreted his silence, but tears began welling in her eyes.

“I... I was completely useless...so I thought...I had no place on that stage...”

“Useless? You? So what?”

“Huh...?”

“Did any of us ever tell you to leave?”

“No...”

“Do you want to leave then?”

“O-Of course I don’t! But...you don’t need someone like me who just messes things up in your party...”

“I care little for how others evaluate you. None of us told you to leave, and you don’t want to leave, either. So there’s no need for you to go anywhere. Am I mistaken?”

Horn shivered, leaning against Diablo’s back. Transparent drops ran down her cheeks as she wept sorrowfully.

“Y-You... You’re not mistaken. I... I want to stay...with you...with everyone!”

Diablo opened the door to the inn.

“In that case, you can stay with us for as long as you’d like. No one will ever send you away.”

To be continued...



Afterword

Thank you very much for reading Volume 5 of *How NOT to Summon a Demon Lord*.

I'm Yukiya Murasaki, the author of this work.

This episode had Diablo conquering his own dungeon and gaining a huge power up. I had Rose, the Magimatic Maid, planned since the early drafts, and she finally got to appear. She's a bit of the obsessive stalker-type, but she's a good girl at heart so I hope you all like her.

In the past, there was this opinion that "having stories take place underground doesn't work in light novels," and it seemed like putting a dungeon in would be impossible, but...having written this volume, I can't help but appreciate the way the fantasy boom changed things. If you enjoyed Diablo's dungeon crawling, nothing would make me happier.

Next volume, the plan is we'll have Diablo and his group storm the Royal Capital. It'll be the climax of the Church arc, so please look forward to it.

Now for some announcements: Volume 2 of the *How NOT to Summon a Demon Lord* manga, written by Naoto Fukuda, should be published the same time as this volume. It should be a different kind of fun from the original novel, so please do check it out.

Special Thanks—

To Tsurusaki Takahiro, thank you as always for the wonderful illustrations. I get the feeling you outdo yourself every single time. It's the best!

To Ooishi, the designer at Afterglow, thank you for your work on yet another volume!

To my editor, Shouji, forgive me for being behind schedule again... I get the feeling you told me to hurry up with volume 5 because Golden Week was around the corner and I just told you, "Sure, don't worry!" and only just barely made it in time. I'm sorry! And thank you for all your help!

Thanks to all the staff at the Kodansha Light Novel Editing

Department, and to the family and friends who supported me.

And for all of you who have read this, I offer a thank you of the highest level possible.

Thank you all very much!

Yukiya Murasaki









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by Yukiya Murasaki

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